Gutters

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'The Calamity' has left the world stripped and dying. Alone in a civilian bunker in Munich, Sealand will be reunited with the last known living member of his surrogate family and together, they will set out across Europe to find those they have lost.

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Some people were calling it the rapture.

Some gathered together in droves in front of all manner of theological representations, on their knees with their hands in the air, and actually welcomed the event with tears in their eyes and a smile on their lips, held fast in the belief that it was some kind of divine event being put in place by a savior returning to strip them of their mortal lives.

Some waited in churches, laid on pews with their families, quiet collections of four or five person colonies, while others waited in the yards, calmly digging their own shallow graves while trying to convince their distraught children that everything would be okay.

Others gathered with weapons and fire and set to destroying shelters. "Repent and be saved" was their message, howling of the hellfire and misery that waited for any soul too lost in their own fear and decadence to turn their heart to God and await the celestial intervention with anything but hope and prayer.

Peter Kirkland thinks that all of them were insane and that any person with half a brain in their head should have known exactly what it was.

The end of the world. Armageddon. The apocalypse.

Scientists put a nicer word on it. They called it 'The Calamity' as if it were a simple misfortune and not the extinction of mankind, and the papers ate it right up. It was softer. A kinder, gentler presentation of information; an elbow in the ribs on the subway rather than a terrified man in the terminal with a cardboard sign shrieking in the face of passers by. Newscasters were more than happy to speculate that, while life would be changing, it was certainly not the end of man so long as every one was to get to a shelter in time.

More people perished killing each other over the scarce places in the bunkers than in the first flash.

In the days preceding The Calamity, Sealand was not sure what to think. He had been in England during the event on June seventh on a 'diplomatic visit' to his part time guardian, waiting in a huddled mass of nerves and fear in Arthur's sitting room while the frazzled Englishmen ran, metaphorically, back and forth between various other representations of the European nations, trying to get the situation under control by getting his terrified people to the shelters or, at the very least, into sturdy buildings that might make it through the first hits.

They were supposed to have another week to prepare when the first flash came.

A horrifying heat, hotter than anything Peter has ever known, swept over them all in one pure, white burst of light, and immediately burnt anything and anyone in the bare air into nothing more than a greasy streak of a shadow on streets and building walls, bricks melting and pavement turning to steaming, black soup beneath their feet. Millions, simply gone in an instant.

The earthquakes did not come until after the second flash decimated the southern hemisphere a day later. All radio contact with Asia was cut in less than an hour followed by Italy, Greece, and Turkey soon after. Sinkholes opened in thousands of cities and with them came tsunamis and floods and soon, low-lying cities were drowning and the nations were crumbling as quickly as their buildings.

The third flash hit central and northern Europe again several days later, but by that time, Peter was already too far gone with fever to remember it, still tucked away in England's sitting room beneath what was left of the collapsed ceiling, pressed between the backs of Arthur Kirkland and Francis Bonnefoy, soaked with the sweat of their own sickness as England weakly hammered away at the broken radio, hoarsely screaming for the help of anyone still left breathing.

Peter cannot remember who it was that finally came for them or how many days later it was.

He had floated in and out of consciousness, barely aware of the heavy rocking of the ground beneath him and the overpowering scent of rust and salt and sulphur and blood, and smoke. Faintly, he had known he was on a boat but his knowledge stopped at that fact and it wouldn't be until nearly a month later that he would learn that it had been a civilian envoy who had pulled him out of the rubble and taken him to the bunker in Munich.

He had woken to the feeling of hands on his arms, much too soft to belong to anyone like him, and found himself before a young woman missing half of her face working a bottle of aloe into his skin. He had been afraid of her immediately. She had no hair and only one eye, her skin black and red and wet looking beneath thin bandages soaked in red and in obvious need of changing, her lips split over her teeth and stippled with the remains of many blisters.

He had screamed.

Or rather, he tried to scream. He tried to scream for Berwald first and then Tino and Arthur and Francis and anyone, but all that came out of him was a series of strangled gasps and coughs that brought red and black ash to his tongue. The woman had pulled him, struggling and crying, to her breast and stroked his hair with her hands, hands that were still too soft, and whispered to him in German in a vain act of calm comfort, her voice whispery and full of gravel, reminding Peter of crinkling paper.

He had resisted her fiercely. He was terrified of her and her melted face and struggled and kicked, trying to twist from her grasp but only managed to writhe weakly, his skin igniting with pain each time he grazed her dirty clothes. He needed to be free of her. He needed away from her and her red flesh and sodden, stinking bandages. Still, she did not let him go and he had dissolved into tears, clutching the ripped fabric of his ash streaked shirt, and begged for Sweden. At that, the woman had hushed and let a quiet moment pass before

asking in English if that is where he was from. He had only cried harder and the woman had bowed her head and whispered to him that Scandinavia was gone.

At that, he had frozen. In the third flash, she had explained, northern Europe had taken the brunt of the heat and thus far, not a soul had been found alive among the charred wreckage. She apologized and stroked his hair and told him that there would be no possibility of going back.

She held him until he sobbed himself to sleep.

He slept for several days, drifting in and out of his fevered haze for only seconds at a time before curling back into himself and trying to drown out the sounds of people screaming, trying to quash the vicious churning of his stomach and the itchy, razing pain of his own flash burns, raw and peeling like a sunburn. Faintly, he had been aware of those soft hands; touching him gently the entire time, soothing him by way of cool gel against his blistering flesh and oily rags against his sweating brow, slow and careful, but without the hard calluses that he had become to accustomed to from his years with Berwald and Tino.

He had, at some time, asked for her name, but by that point, her lips were too blistered and cracked for her to speak any longer and she had simply brushed her long fingers through his hair and lulled him back into sleep, a hand placed over his own.

When he woke again, his ghoulish caretaker was dead in the cot beside him.

Her face was already rotten and yellow and her body raided by the others for her boots and clothes, leaving her stark naked and bruised in the low light of the bunker. Again, he had cried, reaching for her, and pleaded for her to wake again, grasping for her soft hands and shrieking when all he found were mounds of pustules and sloughing flesh where her slow, gentle fingers had once been.

A man two beds away had shouted for him to be quiet and he had complied, turning over to face the wall, trembling and sobbing into his hands.

It was nearly a week later when someone would finally come to remove her fetid remains from her cot and she was replaced by another woman almost immediately, much less kind, but seemingly unmarred. She never spoke a word to Peter and within several days was dead as well. The cycle would repeat it's self for months until Sealand was finally well enough to shakily drag his cot to the far end of the bunker, away from the lights and away from the reeking masses.

Five months would pass until he could stand again and work was immediately thrust upon him. A man had shoved a bucket of brown water and a torn rag into his hands and explained to him that he was in a community fallout shelter in Munich and that if he expected to stay there, he would need to earn his keep. It became his job to scrub cots clean along with three other boys who would later tell him that everyone in the bunker was a refugee from neighboring countries who had been picked up by rescue boats.

"Run by people, not the government," they had explained.

The boats came and went in two-month cycles and each time they returned, they brought with them more people, not a single of them in good health, and the bunker was soon full past capacity and people too weak to stand were simply dropped on the floor where they often remained until someone inevitably came to drag their corpse away.

Peter had gone through every inch of the shelter and was never able to find Arthur or Francis.

He had spent half a year scrubbing death out of canvas. It became a routine; wake, eat his portion of claimed rations, help clear the bodies to be burned outside, scrub the cots, return to his own bed and try to sleep. In the months that passed, he befriended a young,

asthmatic boy from Poland. The boy had lost his family and had to wear a thick, black respirator mask over his nose and mouth to filter the putrid air and he had shown Peter the big bag of spare filters he had and made him promise not to show anyone else, since if he were to lose them, he would be unable to breath properly. Peter was quick to agree and took pity on the scrawny child, inviting him to share his cot.

When the boy died several weeks later, Sealand was neither surprised nor distraught. People came and people went and it was foolish to get close to anyone. He simply rolled the young man out of his bed and set to taking his belongings, a routine that was all too common when someone passed away. He had taken the boy's boots, the same size as his own, and his mask and bag of filters, hiding them away in his stained pillowcase before hauling him to the gates where he would later be thrown into the pit outside and burned with the rest of them.

He hadn't shed a single tear.

He hadn't cried as he watched them take the boy out the next morning, too thin and white and stripped naked. He had simply watched, rag clutched in his fist, and gone back to his cleaning as soon as the doors clanged shut.

Some people were still calling it the rapture.

Peter Kirkland still thought they were insane.

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By the time the December ship comes, there is no one left in the shelter that had come in with him.

Peter is cleaning cots when the ship begins to unload and within minutes, he begins to catch bits and pieces of hushed news and whispered rumors, as he always does. People are quick to assess the groups coming in and are faster still at jumping to conclusions based on where they had been found. If there were a large group of survivors from one area, it meant that there was hope of rebuilding in that country. If there were no survivors from another area, it meant hope was lost for them and good riddance, nothing to be done about it.

Generally, he ignores the gossip, as much of it is rarely true. There is not anything new to be learned; most of the world is dead, including his beloved family, and beyond that, he doesn't care to know. He doesn't want to return to the surface and see what had become of the land and he certainly doesn't want to see the pit full of fire blackened skeletons just outside the bunker doors. And so he ignores them as the haggard team of rescue workers begins to carry new survivors inside and continues to clean the beds alongside the other boys.

"'aven't y'heard?" One says.

"What?" Asks another.

"'bout who they found in t'last run!"

"Ahh, I did!" A third chimes in. "About the blonde guy, eh?"

One of the boys shakes Peter's shoulder. "Did y'hear?"

Peter eyes him warily and goes back to his work. "No."

"'verybody they found was in th' Netherlands an' France, 'cept for one."

"Yeah!" The second boy nods enthusiastically. "They found 'im above the German border."

"So?" Peter has only been half listening to them in the first place, staring placidly at the dirty canvas in front of him. He doesn't care. Gossip is gossip and it's never done any of them a lick of good and he's had quite enough of getting his hopes up.

"So, they found 'im on the last patch 'f dry land in *Denmark.* Y'know, the one that sunk? They said 'e was speakin' *Swedish.* "

The bucket clatters and spills rank water all over the floor when his foot catches the handle as he bolts for the bunker doors.

It takes him fifteen minutes of pushing through throngs of people before he finally makes it to the front of the line where workers are unloading the caravan full of people. Some are able to walk on their own, but most are being brought in on makeshift stretchers or are being carried and Peter watches, anxious, as they bring each group in, frantically searching for the rumored Swede. As the groups began to thin out, he yanks the sleeve of another spectator.

"I heard they found a guy in Denmark…didn't they bring him in?" He asks.

"Yeah," the man replies and jerks his thumb in the direction of the wall. "Brought him in first. They wanted to keep him close to the doors."

Peter frowns. "Why?"

The man just laughs. "Less distance to carry him in the morning. People are already staking claims on his clothes."

Peter's eyes widen at this and he pushes away from the man and begins to search the walls, looking for any sign of who he is looking for. There are plenty of new faces; all of them are wrapped in threadbare wool blankets, some crying and others staring blankly ahead, all coughing and reeking of infection, clutching their belongings to their chest and trying to ignore the greedy looks of the others.

At the far end of the bunker, tucked in the corner, Peter finally finds the man in question, laid out on the floor beneath a blanket, surrounded by a tight ring of whispering people, waiting like vultures, but not bothering to get close enough to check for life. Peter shoves past them all, shouting at them to move, and drops to his knees beside the covered figure on the ground, hands hovering above the dirty blanket. Through the fabric, he can hear the man taking wet, rattling breaths, shallow and too fast to be healthy, his shoulders just barely moving beneath the blanket.

"Don't touch 'im!" Someone shouts. "He's sick!"

Peter ignores them and tugs the blanket back.

A sob tears through him as soon as the covers settle.

t's just a stranger. No one that he knows. His hair is blonde and long and singed with ash, his jaw set in a hard grimace and blood slowly dribbling out of his ears onto his quivering shoulders each time he takes a struggled breath. Even with his burnt flesh, though, Peter can immediately tell that the man is not even Swedish.

No glasses.

No calloused hands.

Not who he wants to see.

Peter pulls the blanket back up over him and staggers to his feet, wrist whipping across his eyes as he shoves past the crowd to get

back to his bed. He falls into his cot and buries his face in his damp, stinking pillow, and curls his fingers into the heels of his hands in the shaky hope that his nails biting into his palms will keep him from making too much noise as the tears continue to rush down his cheeks and into the dirty canvas of his bed.

Rumors are only rumors. He should have known better.

He tucks into himself and clutches the front of his shirt. He never found England and this is no different. He never should have gotten his hopes up. Sweden is dead. Finland is dead. The land is dead, the people are dead, the animals are dead.

Everything is dead.

"Papa…" he chokes quietly into his pillow.

The response he wants never comes and the sick man is dead before the day ends.

Six months later and the boats stop coming.

At first, the rush of survivors only slows to a trickle, the barges bringing back a dozen people compared to the fifty or so average that they have been maintaining, and the people who manage to make the trip to Munich often don't live long enough to even get a bed. Soon, though, twelve turns into ten and ten turns into five, and by the time June arrives, no one has heard from the envoy captains in over a month and the bunker doors are only ever opened to carry out the dead.

When July comes, the rations begin to thin out and with no boats coming, there is no depending on scavenged goods to keep the supply bins stocked. Peter does a well enough job when it comes to hoarding and keeping his share of items safe, but thievery quickly overtakes the barter system and soon, his protein bars and canned vegetables begin to disappear and he starts to store everything he

has in a ratty backpack which he carries with him at all times, awake or in sleep.

Even cutting down on his stolen goods, Sealand's health is nothing to boast about. His nose is perpetually runny and when the bunker's air filters cease to function, he frequently loses his voice under the strain of breathing the hot, dust filled air. He's shivery and weak and he's lost more weight than he would care to admit; enough so that he can no longer keep himself warm at night, even wrapped in his threadbare bundle of wool blankets. He will lie on his side and curl himself into a ball, tight as he can, and rub his hands up and down his lean arms, trying to coax out heat with the slow friction, teeth chattering until the morning bell rings and he drags himself out of bed to resume his work in cleaning cots.

He's the only one left with the job. The three boys who once accompanied him are long dead. One of starvation, one of sickness, one of head trauma after being caught stealing a box of band-aids.

It's a mess and every day that Peter wakes up still breathing, he wonders if he really has anything to be thankful for.

Sometimes, when it storms hard enough, Sealand can hear the rain tattering against the door of the shelter.

It's a comforting sound, monotonous and consistent, and it reminds him of home, bringing the unreal scent of fresh, clean nature with it every time the clouds gather over Munich. He's well aware that the rain that comes now is nothing like the rain the fell then and that if he were to go outside, it would make his lungs hurt worse than they already do, but with every storm, he contents himself by dragging his cot to the entrance of the bunker where he can lay beneath the covers and listen to the drops patter against the door.

Those are the only nights that he can sleep and feel well rested in the morning.

He makes the mistake of making it a habit, however, and others soon begin to catch on to the fact that when it rains, he is lulled far enough from their fetid little world for the scavengers to come out, unchallenged. His stash of rations dwindles each time he falls asleep by the door, but, as far as he is concerned, it is a small price to pay for the hours of dead sleep that he gets.

There is one stormy night where his rest is interrupted.

He is laying on his stomach with the blankets drawn up over his head when the steady drip of the rain is suddenly broken by the muffled sound of the metal clasp on his backpack being undone. It hardly makes a sound; barely a click. But for the split second it exists, it ruins the rain and Peter flies up in bed and meets the startled eyes of a man on the floor. The man is new by their standards, having come in with the very last enjoy, and still looks to be in decent enough health. His hair has not yet lost its luster and his skin is still pink and untainted by spending months under ground. He stares up at Peter from his place on his knees, the backpack held in both hands, and for a moment, they just look at each other before the man scrambles to his feet and tries to run.

Peter doesn't know why they always run. It's not like there is anywhere to go.

Nonetheless, the pack contains the last of his rations and Sealand flies to his feet and bolts after the man, throwing himself at his waist and dragging him to the floor by a line of cots along the wall. The backpack tumbles from his hand and Peter crawls over him to make a grab for the shoulder strap, panting with the exertion of running for less than half a minute, and pulls the bag up as he starts back for his bed.

The man's hand closes around on Peter's ankle and he flips onto his stomach while he forces the boy's feet out from under him, sending him crashing to the damp, concrete floor, the backpack again rolling out of their reach. Sealand yelps loudly and kicks at the stranger.

"Let go of me!" He shouts. "That bag is mine!"

The man snarls and shoves Peter sideways. He starts to pick himself up and shifts forward to grab the bag, but Sealand fists the back of the man's shirt and hauls him back down. "Stop it, you brat!" He hisses and kicks back at him. His heel catches Peter's chin and sends him sprawling onto his back. He stoops down and reaches for the bag, and again, Peter launches himself at the man.

"Give it back! It doesn't belong to you!" He manages to get a grip on the bag and pulls it against his chest just as the man knocks him over, sending him skidding across the floor. He pushes himself up onto his quaky, skinned knees and hugs the bag tightly, glaring hard at him. The man meets his gaze with just as angry of a look and starts to stalk forward again, his hands balled into fists and his lips curled back in a furious sneer.

"Give it to me, you little shit," he grabs the front of Sealand's shirt and yanks him up, drawing his fist back. "Give it to someone who actually has a chance."

Peter starts to reply, but his struggles are cut short by a loud, metallic bang. Both of them freeze and the whole bunker is quiet in an instant, every person with working eyes turning to stare at the shelter doors. There is a beat of silence before another thud resounds through the room and people begin scrambling to hide; they tip over cots and empty supply bins and scratch at each other for space behind anything solid, dread beginning to seep through the small crowd as they fight for a place to shield themselves. No one has come to the bunker doors in months, but rumors of violent raiders have nestled into the minds of the shelter residents and stacked with the rampant sickness and everyday violence, paranoia has taken hold of every person there.

They know they are dying, but are still too scared to face it at the hands of anyone but themselves.

The man swallows and drops Peter as he hurries to find his own place to hide. Peter gets slowly to his feet and stumbles back to his cot, backpack secured over his shoulders as he drags his bed away from the door and folds it down in the far corner of the room and shimmies beneath it. He knows he should be scared; the heavy locks on the doors are broken and anyone can open it from the outside, survivors and raiders alike. But through his exhaustion, he can manage only a bare nervousness when the banging stops and is replaced by the rusty groan of the door handle spinning.

Silence sweeps over the bunker and no one utters a sound when the doors creak open, rain and wind immediately overtaking the hushed, hidden crowd. Peter folds his arms and hides his face between them, making himself as small as possible and listening, tense, as heavy footsteps begin to echo through the shelter. The steps are slow and cautious and each footfall jangles with the sound of bits of metal clinking together and wet fabric that shifts against it's self in quiet flaps against what sounds like plastic. Peter curiously lifts his head enough to stare around his bed, catching sight of the visitor as they move into the center of the bunker, illuminated by the last dim bulb that they have.

He is tall and soaked with the rain, his face hidden by what looks like the tattered remains of an old bed sheet, eyes shielded by dark welding goggles, their lenses streaked with rain and mud. He keeps the collar of his heavy trench coat turned up around his neck and buttoned as high up as it will go, the ragged hem slick and sticking to his tall boots. He walks slowly and with a slight limp and he keeps his gloved hands wrapped around the stock of a long, old looking rifle as he cautiously steps further into the wide room.

Peter swallows thickly and hides his face again. It has been over a year since he has seen anyone with a gun and he doesn't particularly want to look down its barrel if it is going to blow his face off.

The footsteps stop in the center of the room and for a moment, there is not a single sound. The rifle clacks as the stranger shoulders it

and there is a slight rustling of fabric.

"Hello?" A hoarse voice calls. "Anybody alive in here?"

Peter's head snaps up. He knows that voice.

He forces himself to his feet and pushes past his cot to rush to the middle of the bunker, standing several feet away from the stranger. The man looks down at him, startled, and starts to recoil, his gun slipping from his shoulder and hitting the floor. He has his sodden head wrap partially unwound and Peter can just barely see his mouth, lips chapped and pale beneath the colorful sheet, and he watches as they open and close uselessly several times.

"P-Peter…?" There is another stretch of silence, this time broken by hushed, vapid whispering as the other residents watch the stranger yank his goggles and wrap off, revealing a shock of overgrown blonde hair and wide, blue eyes. He drops the sheet and Peter's face crumples.

His hair is longer than Sealand remembers and one of his eyes is half shut and milky white, but even with his thinned body and sharper features, the connection is instantly made. He has the same face and the same stupid expression and when he drops to his knees and opens his arms, Peter's eyes spill over with tears and a strained sob tears through him as he pitches forward.

"Mathias!" He cries, voice cracking, and throws his arms around Denmark's neck, clinging to him when his knees give out and he collapses against him in a trembling mess, his shirt soaking through with secondhand rain. Relief floods him and ignites his belly with warmth when Denmark doesn't disappear beneath his hands like his friends so often do in his dreams and he hiccups, pressing his face into the crook of the other man's wet neck. "Y-you're okay…"

Denmark's arms circle around him and pull him close into a hug that, any other time, Sealand would have complained about being too tight, a hand coming up to the back of the boy's head and into his

hair. "Peter," he breathes quietly. "Peter, you're…" he draws back enough to cradle Sealand's face in his hands, his good eye looking him up and down, disbelievingly assessing him before he breaks out into a wide smile and hauls him back into his arms, swinging him back and forth, laughing loudly and burying his face against the young man's shoulder. "Holy shit, Peter!"

As Peter clutches to him and sobs into his jacket, the others start to slowly come out of hiding and a circle begins to form around them, suspicious eyes darting to the rifle on the floor and the large bag on Denmark's back. Before Peter can even catch his breath, one of the crooked veterans of the shelter steps forward and grabs the back of Denmark's coat, pulling him back enough to get his attention.

"Who are you?" Her eyes narrow when Denmark ignores her and shakes her hand off, going back to smothering Sealand against his chest. She frowns and shoves at him. "I asked you a question!" She barks. "What are you doing here?"

Denmark turns around and glares at her. "Do you mind?" He growls and pulls Sealand closer. "In case you haven't noticed, we're kind of having a moment here."

She squints angrily at him and jerks her head in the direction of the bunker doors. "You can't stay here," she spits. "There aren't enough beds and there isn't enough food." She kicks his rifle back to him and it knocks against his knobby knees. "Get out."

"No!" Peter wriggles out of Denmark's arms and stands protectively in front of him. "Please, he can have my cot and some of my rations a-and…" he coughs wetly and scrubs his hands over his eyes. "Don't make him leave." He steps back and grabs Denmark's hand, pulling him to his feet and holding tightly onto his arm. "Please don't make him leave."

She stares at them both and crosses her arms in front of herself. "What's he to you?" She leers incredulously at the Dane, he paying

her no mind and dropping a hand on Sealand's shoulder. "Gimme a good reason why we shouldn't kick him out back into the rain."

Peter swallows thickly and squeezes Denmark's hand. "H-He's…" he bites his lip and stands closer to him. "He's my uncle."

She pauses for a moment and watches them both as Denmark winds his arms around Peter's shoulders, hands clasped over his, standing behind him and evenly meeting her gaze in a staunch challenge of wills. After a long beat of silence, her lips curl back and she waves a dismissive hand at him.

"Fine. He can stay the night." Her hand closes into a fist and she points at him. "But I want you gone in the morning, do you hear me? And if you touch *anything* that doesn't belong to you, you'll be in the pit with the rest of them. Understand?"

Denmark frowns at her. "Who the hell died and made you boss?"

"Mitchell Donnoven," she replies tersely. "You don't move from the cot, you don't talk to anyone, and you don't touch anything. Are we clear?"

Denmark's arms tighten around Sealand. "Crystal."

"Good." She turns around and starts to stalk back to her own corner of the room, but thinks better of it and turns back to try and snatch the rifle off of the floor. Denmark is faster than she is, however, and easily pulls it out of her reach.

"I don't think so," he snarls, grinning when she glares furiously at him. "It took me too long to find that to let you have it. This is mine and so is this," he pats the bag on his back. "And if I catch *any* of *you* touching it," he nods at Peter. "Or touching him or any of his things, I'll bash your face in before you know what's happening." He smiles warmly at her, cocking his head. "Are we clear?"

She scoffs and turns on her heel.

"Crystal."

Peter pulls Denmark to his cot on the wall, easily ignoring the stares of the others, and pushes him to sit down once he's peeled out of his wet coat and boots, leaving him damp and cold in his pants and torn, ratty sweater. He seats himself on the edge of the bed and lets Sealand fuss over him, his smile never faltering as the boy drapes a blanket around his shoulders and hangs his coat to dry over the cross bar beneath the bed.

"I can't believe you're alive…" he murmurs. "How did you get out of England?"

Peter crouches down and hides Denmark's boots under his coat. "I dunno." He straightens back up and shrugs his backpack off. "I can't really remember anything. One of the boats picked me up and brought me here." He opens his bag and starts to pull a box of calorie bars out, but Denmark's hand drops on his and he shakes his head.

"Keep it," he says and bends down to grab his own pack, unzipping it to pull the flap back and draw out an unlabeled can. He grins and crosses his legs and motions for Sealand to sit in his lap as he pulls a dented spoon from his pocket. "It's my treat."

Peter nods and stashes his bag back away, eagerly crawling up to sit on Denmark's legs, his back flush with the larger man's chest, smiling when the Dane's arms pull the blanket around them both and he starts to wrestle the can open.

"What is it?" He asks.

Denmark shrugs. "Who knows?" He drops his chin to rest on top of Sealand's head. "Something awesome, I'm sure." Peter can feel his jaw shift as he smiles again. "I don't care what it is, though. I don't think this day can get any better."

The top of the can pulls free and Peter peers inside, his hands immediately shooting out to slap over the opening, a panicked expression overtaking his face at once. Denmark blinks, surprised. "What's the matter?"

Peter shakes his head. "We can't let anyone see this," he whispers. "There are people here who would kill you for this."

Denmark pauses, but after a moment, draws the blanket up over their heads and leans back against the wall until they are completely covered. "What is it?" He asks quietly.

"Spaghetti." He turns and looks back at Denmark, eyes wide. "Where did you find this?"

"In a burnt out gas station outside of Bern."

Peter gapes at him. "In Switzerland? How did you-?"

Denmark cuts him off and presses the spoon into his hand, the soft leather of his gloves a stark contrast to the rough skin of Peter's palm. "We can talk about that later," he says and curls the boy's fingers around the utensil. "Eat. You're even skinnier than you were before this all happened."

Peter takes the spoon and dips it into the cold noodles, nodding slowly. "So are you."

Denmark shrugs and through the thin fabric of his shirt, Peter can see the Dane's jutting collarbone shift above his collar. "I'm still bigger than you," he teases. He brings his arms around Peter's waist and places his chin on the boy's shoulder. "Now eat."

Sealand twirls the spoon until he has gathered a small clump of noodles. "Okay," he says and brings it to his lips. "But you have to have some too. We can share it."

Only after Denmark agrees does Peter finally begin to eat. After so many months of tasteless rations, the sweet, rubbery noodles are like nothing he's ever tasted; he'd nearly forgotten the tang of tomatoes and the sharpness of salt and the easy give of the pasta between his teeth is a welcome change from the hard, crumbly bars that he has become so accustomed to. Denmark laughs lowly as he watches Peter excitedly tear his way through the can and between them both, the spaghetti is gone in less than a minute. Sealand hides the can in his backpack before anyone can see it, but they don't come out from their blanket tent.

Even though it was barely half of a can, Peter feels full for the first time in over a year.

Denmark resettles himself on his side and Sealand is quick to follow, curling up against him and holding on to the front of his ratty shirt. He's still a bit wet and smells like sweat and smoke, but not the chemical kind. He can't quite place it, but it reminds Sealand of a campfire. Campfires that he used to have with…

Peter swallows thickly. "Um…"

Denmark wraps his arms around him and tilts his head down so that he can look at him. "What's wrong?"

"Have you…" his fingers tighten in the fabric of Denmark's sweater. "Have you found anyone else?" He asks quietly.

There is a long pause wherein Denmark exhales slowly; a rattling, thin sound. "A few," he says after a moment. "I found Spain in Naples… he's missing a leg but he's doing all right."

"You were in Italy?"

He nods. "For a little while. Feliciano is hanging in there but Romano is dead." He sighs again. "They had Monaco with them and they're trying to dig people out of what's left of the Capitol. They had heard a

rumor that Prussia and Germany were still kicking so…" he trails off. "Here I am."

"But you haven't found…"

"No." Denmark cuts him off. "No one that we're looking for." His arms tighten around Sealand's waist and he pulls him closer.

"Oh."

Denmark pulls a hand up to the back of Peter's head and draws him forward to press his face into the boy's hair. "Don't think about it right now," he says softly. "You've had too much time to think about it already. I'll explain everything in the morning, okay?"

Sealand nods and rubs at his eyes. "Okay."

For several moments, they make themselves comfortable, still under the covers, and Peter does his best to ignore the campfire smell and the way Denmark's ribs poke his arms while the older man protectively wraps himself around him. Faintly, Sealand can hear a low rattling emanating from the Dane's chest, but as his eyes drift shut, he focuses on the steady thrumming of his heart instead, a solid reminder that he is still there. He doesn't mind that his shirt is still damp or that his embrace is so tight; the warmth that begins to build between them, caught beneath the blankets, is much more comforting and for the first time since The Calamity, Peter feels safe. Not sheltered or hidden, but truly *safe.*

He shifts his hand down to touch Denmark's, tapping his knuckles. "Denmark?" He whispers.

"Mm?"

"Um…could you…" he trails off. "Can you take off your gloves for a second?"

Denmark hesitates but nods and awkwardly reaches around Sealand to strip off his gloves and tucks them away in his pocket, fanning out his fingers when Peter reaches forward to lace their hands together, his so much smaller than Denmark's when the older man clasps his hands over Peter's. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, a faint smile working the corners of his mouth up when the Dane's warm, scratchy palms brush across his knuckles, distant familiarity appearing in the back of his mind when the realization hits him. It's such an asinine, little thing, but it makes Peter want to cry all over again.

Denmark's hands are riddled with calluses.

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Sealand wakes in the morning to the sound of muffled coughing.

He stifles and yawn and rolls over onto his side, his cheek pressed against Denmark's arm, and looks up at him as he shifts out of the covers. Denmark is on his back, eyes closed, and has a hand placed lightly over his lips, his other trapped under Peter as the boy rubs the sleep from his face and props himself up onto his elbows.

"Are you okay?"

Denmark blinks groggily and offers him a wane smile, his hand dropping to ruffle his hair. "Yeah, fine. Just swallowed wrong is all." He sighs and tucks the corner of the blanket back down around Sealand's shoulders and motions for him to lie back down. "It's still early. You can sleep for a while longer if you want to."

Peter shakes his head and rests his chin back down on Denmark's shoulder. "No, I'm awake." He peers up at him when he turns his head and coughs again. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Denmark just grins and mushes Sealand's head into the pillow. "I told you, I'm fine. You ain't gotta worry about me."

Sealand squirms out from under his hand and turns over onto his back, crossing his arms and huffing indignantly. "I'm not worried! I'm just asking." His eyes flit to briefly meet Denmark's. "It's just 'cause Berwald used to say you're too stupid to ask for help is all. So, you know…" He looks down. "Don't be stupid."

Denmark's face softens and he pushes himself up enough to sit against the wall. "Hey, I'm here aren't I?" He nudges Peter's arm, smirking. "You ever heard the saying 'too stupid to give up'?"

Sealand nods. "He said that about you too."

He laughs and scrubs a hand down his face. "Yeah," he says softly, pushing his hair back. "I'm sure he did."

Peter pauses, swallowing the thick, watery feeling that starts to rise in his throat, and fists the blankets. He looks back at Denmark, watching as he lets his hands fall back to his lap and leans heavily against the wall, eyes falling shut and exhaling, his face bearing exhaustion despite having just slept. He really does look different than he used to; he's all sharp angles now, dusted with dirt and grime and bruised looking, so unlike the broad figure he once was, back when he still came to Stockholm during the summers to help Sweden put together new furniture or fix up Peter's tree house. His eyes blink open and Peter reaches forward to curl his fingers into the mud flecked fabric of the Dane's shirt, stock silent except for the small breaths that catch in the blanket when he turns his face down.

Denmark sighs again and rests his hand on Sealand's shoulder. "I know, kiddo. I know." He allows silence to fall over them while Peter struggles to compose himself, but after a moment, he squeezes the boy's arm and sits him up to look him straight on, his dead eye not really focused on anything, but the other staring at him seriously. "Listen, Peter, I want you to come with me." He jerks his head in the direction of the door. "I can't stay here, but I don't want to leave you with these people. They obviously aren't taking care of you and I don't trust them to keep you safe."

Peter wipes his eyes. "I d-don't need anyone to take care of me. I'm old enough to look out for myself." He sniffs.

Denmark nods. "It's even more dangerous out there and I know I'm probably not as fun as I used to be, but I can't just leave you here." He smirks and claps his palm against Peter's back. "If you come with me, I can at least keep an eye on you while you look out for yourself."

Sealand folds his hands in his lap and looks at Denmark curiously. "You said you were in Italy before right? And now you're here, so…" he frowns. "Where are you going?"

Denmark bows his head slightly and sighs. "Ah. Well, I'm trying to get back home, I guess." He stretches over the edge of the cot and grabs his pack from the floor, hauling it up and drawing out a ratty, waterlogged road map. He starts to carefully unfold it. "You remember the Øresund Bridge right?"

Peter nods. "We used to take it whenever we came to visit you."

"Right. Well, one of the boat captains told me that parts of the bridge are still standing. Not on my side, but the part that connects to Malmö." He lays the map out over his lap and Sealand shifts forward to look at it. There is a long, thick line drawn out in black marker that starts in Italy and cuts up in almost a straight line through Switzerland to Germany, curving towards Poland and ending at the border of the Baltic Sea. "If part of the bridge made it through what happened, I'm willing to bet Malmö did too." He taps the map with his index finger. "That's where I'm going."

Sealand bites his lip. "You're going to Sweden?"

Denmark nods. "That's the plan."

"But…don't you want to go home? Your home, I mean."

Denmark's jaw sets and he stares down at the map in his hands. "There isn't anything left," he says gruffly. "Half of my land is under water and the rest of it is too burnt out to be livable. I don't have anything to go back *to.* "

Peter pauses awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

Denmark shakes his head. "Don't be. You don't have anything to be sorry about." He offers him a lopsided smile and sighs. "Thanks though." He motions to the map again. "Anyway, my plan is to go through Poland. There isn't any fuel left, so none of the old civilian barges are going out anymore, but there's a rumor floating around in a few shelters that there is still someone running a boat out of Shupsk. Nobody wants to give me a straight answer, but I've heard

from more than a few people that the guy doing it has a stupid way of talking."

Peter's eyes widen. "Do you think it's Felix?"

"Could be. Point is, there's a chance someone is still seaborne. And the water is too unpredictable now to take a rowboat, so my plan is hinging on this guy actually existing." He exhales loudly. "If he doesn't, then I'm not quite sure what to do next." He smirks. "Probably swim or something."

"How are you going to get to Poland?" Peter gingerly takes the map and peers over it. "Do you have a car?"

Denmark shakes his head. "No fuel left, remember? And even if there was, the roads are too warped to drive on. A lot of the main highways don't even exist anymore… all the heat melted it into the rocks." He clicks his tongue. "I've just been walking."

Peter gapes at him. "You *walked* here? From Naples?"

"Further than that. I started out in Messina."

"What? How did you wind up in Messina?"

Denmark shrugs. "Same way you got here. One of the civilian envoys picked me up. I don't remember much about getting there though. Or anything, really. Last thing I remember is somebody hauling me out of the back of a truck in Brovst."

"You don't remember what happened? The flashes?"

"Nope." He shakes his head. "People have told me stories but beyond that, I've got nothin'. It took me a week after I woke up in the shelter to even remember who I was."

"Oh." Peter pauses and starts to fold the map back up. "You're lucky."

"You remember it?"

He nods. "Kind of. It was just really hot."

Denmark makes a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat and tucks the map away in his bag, nodding. "It's good that you remember some of it, though. Somebody is gonna have to tell the next generation about it."

Sealand snorts. "Do you really think we'll last that long?"

"I do."

"How come?"

"Humanity made it this far." He leans back and rubs absently at his chest. "Too stupid to give up, remember?"

Peter shakes his head and draws his knees up to his chin. "I guess." He hugs his legs and stares at his feet. "So, how come you want to go to Malmö?"

Denmark is quiet for a moment before he shifts his hips up and reaches into his pocket. "I don't want you to get your hopes up, but I'm trying to find everyone else. Malmö is a good starting point and as long as the flooding hasn't gotten worse, I'll be able to get to Norway and Finland from Sweden."

"You think they're alive?"

"They've all got mountains and remote places to hide. My whole kingdom's flat as a ship biscuit but I still scraped by." He withdraws his hand and sits back down. "'sides, Berwald knows if I made it out and he didn't, I'd never stop giving him hell for it."

"But…" Peter bites his lip. "Someone told me Scandinavia was gone and that it was impossible to go back to Sweden. What makes you so sure?"

Denmark sighs. "When I woke up in the bunker in Italy, I literally had nothing on me. No clothes, no shoes, zip. Somebody pilfered everything while I was still too sick to do anything about it, so once I was up and moving again, I had to pick clothes off of dead men." He reaches out and takes Peter's hand, pressing something warm into his palm. "I found this when I was going through someone's bag."

Sealand uncurls his fingers. Nestled in his hand is a small, gold, cross-shaped pin.

"The guy who had it came in on the same boat as me. I asked his sister about it and she said he traded a man for it before the envoy found them outside of Stockholm." He looks down, his face darkening slightly. "I know it's a long shot, but it's the best lead I've found."

Peter turns the pin over in his hand. It's untarnished, obviously polished daily, and he can see his reflection in the dull metal, thin and alarmed, staring back at him. It could belong to anyone, really. He has seen clips like it before, back when jewelry was actually worn and something to be proud of.

"You think it's Norway's?"

Denmark shrugs.

"But isn't that kind of…" he trails off and closes his fingers around the pin. "Unlikely?"

Denmark leans back again, but still doesn't meet Peter's eyes, his shoulders sagging and his shirt slipping down one arm. He sighs softly and rakes a hand through his hair. "Some hope is better than no hope."

The clip in his hand suddenly feels a lot heavier.

He clears his throat and gently hands the pin back to Denmark, placing it in his palm and curling the older man's fingers around it. "I

want to come with you," he says after a moment, watching as Denmark carefully tucks the pin back away in his pocket. He pulls back enough to nod, stern and serious, and starts to scoot off of the cot. "We can find them together." He bends down and retrieves his backpack from underneath the bed, the clasp clacking when he snaps it open, and begins to fold up the thin wool blanket, placing it inside with what rations he has left.

Denmark grins and gets up as well. He stretches, his back cracking, and grabs his own bag. "Only take what you think you'll need," he says as he starts to pull his boots back on. "Do you have a coat?"

Peter shakes his head. "No. Is it cold outside?"

"Sometimes…" Denmark raises a curious eyebrow. "How long has it been since you've left the bunker?"

"I haven't."

"Not at all?"

"No. I didn't want to see."

"Shit." Denmark coughs into the crook of his elbow and begins to rummage in his pack. "You aren't gonna like what you see. I'm going to tell you right now, there isn't anything left. Everything has literally burnt up." He pulls a ratty bandana from the depths of his bag and a pair of dark blue swimming goggles a moment later. "No one has tried to clean up, so…" he bites the inside of his cheek. "There are a lot of people still on the roads. Bodies, I mean." He motions for Peter to sit down on the edge of the cot and moves in front of him, tying the bandana around his neck and fixing it to the back of his head. "I try to avoid the main roads, though. I'll try to keep you from seeing them."

Peter wrinkles his nose when Denmark pulls the bandana up over his face. It smells like dirt and sweat. "How come you don't go on the roads? Isn't that faster?"

Denmark's hands pause beside his ears and he shakes his head. "Yeah, it is." He leans over his bag and tugs out a thin windbreaker and places it over the boy's shoulders, zipping it up to his neck and tucking the edge of the bandana into it. "The problem is that there are people out there who never made it into shelters and still managed to survive what happened. People are desperate and they're very, very dangerous. There isn't much for food or supplies left and a lot of them have given up on scavenging." He stretches the goggles over Peter's head and lets them rest on his forehead. "People are turning on each other. A lot of them wait on the main roads for people who are traveling and if they've got anything of use on them, they'll do whatever it takes to get it."

He draws back and lifts up his shirt, exposing a ragged scar along his thin belly. "I had a rain poncho." He drops his shirt and goes back to fussing with the windbreaker, which is much too large and hangs around Peter's knees. "There are also people who are making other people into resources, if you know what I mean."

Peter's eyes widen. "They're…they're eating each other?"

Denmark nods and pulls the hood up over Peter's head. "They are." Once he's satisfied that the jacket is secure, he crouches down so that he is at eye level with Peter and reaches out to take his hands into his own. "Now, listen," he says seriously. "I need you to promise me that when we leave, you'll listen to everything I tell you." He jerks his head in the direction of the bunker doors. "I've been out there for a long time and it's really important that you trust me, okay? I know that you can take care of yourself, but you also need to realize how dangerous it is. It's not just the people either. Nature's gotten just as bad." He squeezes Sealand's hands. "Do you promise to do what I tell you?"

Peter stares at him, wide eyed, and nods jerkily. "I promise."

Denmark smiles and pats his knee. "Good." He straightens back up and starts to pull his own coat on. "I'm not trying to scare you…I just want you to know what you're gonna be getting into." He begins to

wrap the damp sheet from before around his neck and mouth as Peter finished gathering his things.

"How come we have to cover our faces?" He asks. He shakes out his pillowcase and stuffs the contents into his bag along with a tin of mints and a pair of scissors. "Is the air bad?"

"That's part of it," Denmark snaps his goggles on and hauls his bag over one shoulder, his rifle on the other. "When the flashes happened, it set all kinds of shit on fire. Landfills, buildings, cars, you name it, it's been on fire. The air is really caustic because of it. It's also because of the ash. If you breath too much of it, it'll make you sick and if too much of it gets into your eyes…" he taps the left side of his goggles. "You'll go blind. And that's another thing; I need you to always walk on my right side, all right? If you're on the left, I won't be able to see you."

"Okay."

"Okay." He sighs deeply and nods. "Anyone here you want to say goodbye to before we go?"

"No…"

"All right, one last thing before we leave," he reaches around to open the bag around his waist and pulls free a small knife which he hands to Peter. "Once we get going, I'll try to find you something better, but for now, keep this on you at all times. Did Tino ever teach you how to shoot?"

Sealand takes the knife and carefully snaps the sheath clasp closed around his belt loop. "Sort of. He showed me how to hold a gun but I'm not very good at it."

Denmark nods. "That's a start. When we stop at night, I'll show you. I don't have enough bullets for you to actually shoot it, but I'll teach you how to load it and fire it right." He reaches his right hand out for

Peter to take and starts to pull him toward the bunker doors. "Ready?"

Sealand sets his jaw and holds tightly to the Dane's hand as he starts to spin the handle open.

"Ready."

"Try not to inhale," he mutters as he hauls the door back. "The first breath is always the worst."

Light floods the entryway and as his eyes focus, despite his best efforts, he cannot heed Denmark's advice, the Dane easily catching him when he pitches forward, coughing and sputtering into his hands. The air is hot and full of grit and when his vision meets the gray landscape, he can do nothing to stop the sharp breath that flies into him, rushing down his throat and into his chest, igniting his lunges with a burn that he has not felt since the first waves of The Calamity.

To his right, he can just barely make out the edge of the fire pit, a ring of greasy, black pitch trailing from its depths to the bunker doors. As he fights to gain his breath back, he tries not to look; tries not to see the footprints in the ash or the pair of crushed eyeglasses by the huge hole in the ground, the last remnants of dead humans. He tries not to think about whom the glasses belonged to or whether the feet that made the prints were still attached to their owners.

He tries not to remember the little Polish boy.

It's only when Denmark scoops him up and begins to carry him that Peter realizes he is crying. His chest aches and he buries his face into the front of Denmark's coat, still unable to stop the harsh, wracking coughs as the Dane wraps his arms tightly around him and holds him, turning away from the pit and toward the cracked, ash smothered road. He wants to tell Denmark to put him down. He wants him to acknowledge that he is big enough to not need

coddling and that he can take care of himself, but the air hurts and there are bones in the hole and he is absolutely *terrified* .

Denmark's gloved hand suddenly comes to rest on the back of his head, gentle and careful, and he presses his cheek to the side of Sealand's head. "Peter," he says softly, turning down enough for the boy to hear him. "It's going to be okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I'm going to keep you safe." He hugs him just a little bit tighter and through the fabric of his windbreaker, Peter can feel him place a steady kiss to his temple.

"I promise."

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He allows Denmark to carry him for a little over a kilometer, until the bunker it out of sight, before he squirms out of his arms and insists on walking beside him instead, his pride not low enough yet to warrant being hauled around but still too nervous to let go of Denmark's hand, his fingers laced tight around the other man's as they begin their slow trek across the ragged terrain.

When Denmark told him that everything had burnt up, Peter had no trouble believing him. Based on his memories of the heat from the flashes, he never once doubted that things would be charred and ashy, but now, seeing it for the first time, it makes his heart ache in a way he has never felt before. It isn't just a flat wasteland like he had been expecting. He had thought that whole mountains would have been blown away and forests would have been leveled and that everything would just be *gone* , swallowed up by The Calamity and it's furious temperatures and left in a state of empty nothingness surrounded by black water. He hadn't been expecting to see anything.

But everything is very much still there.

Trees are still upright, thin and black like used toothpicks poking out of the rough soil in spindly twists of naked wood that reach into the gray sky, choked with heavy, dark clouds that send a perpetual shower of ember and ash swirling around them as they go, the falling cinder muffling what little sound there is, reminding Peter of winter when the snow used to quiet the world. It only takes him a while to realize that the clouds are in fact smoke and not clouds at all and that the ash is falling because everything is still on fire, and if he looks hard enough into the distance, he can just faintly see the orange glow of something far away stuck in a long smolder.

"Probably a car lot," Denmark tells him when he asks about it.

Cars, too, are still present. They line the main road, most of them twisted and bent and flipped onto their backs or sides and coated in a layer of dust and ash so thick that Sealand can no longer see the paint. Their windows are all broken and the warped pavement beneath their feet is scattered with the remains of shattered glass and soft puffs of interior. As they pass each car, Denmark pulls him forward to walk in front of him, both hands placed on his shoulders as they weave through the crooked remains of the automobile graveyard.

"Never go near the cars if you can help it," he points to the cracked windshield of an overturned delivery truck. "All of these have already been raided for supplies, but people sometimes hide in the bigger ones." He looks down when Peter nervously shifts closer to him and he squeezes his shoulder. "We just have a little further to go and we can get off the main drag. Don't worry."

But Peter does worry. Everything is so silent in their monochrome little world that each time their boots crunch against glass or the gun stock clacks against Denmark's bag, he nearly jumps out of his skin, expecting someone to burst from the shadowed insides of the dead cars. He has only seen people in the shelters and none of them had ever looked very well and the image his brain conjures up of raiders and the people who have been living on the outside is nothing short of horrifying. He imagines them with sunken eyes and greasy, loose skin, bits of bone and hair tied around their belts and clothes as trophies, maybe with mutated features like the characters in the video games Sweden never allowed him to play…

"Hey," Denmark's voice snaps him out of his worried thoughts and he peers up at him as he steers them off of the waves of melted pavement and onto the dusty ground near the off ramp. "We're going to take this way for now. It's a local route, so there won't be as many cars."

Sealand nods and watches as his feet sink into the ash with each step he takes, kicking up tiny clouds of gray. "Where are we going?"

"I'd like to try and make it to the outskirts if we can. Maybe the Lochhausen area." He shields his eyes with a hand and stares up into the bleak sky. "We've gotten an early enough start that we should be able to make it before it gets dark if we hurry."

Peter glances down at Denmark's right leg, watching his slightly gimped steps with a curious eye. He is walking at a fair pace, but it isn't exactly what Sealand would call hurrying. Not that he is going much faster. His lungs are still throbbing painfully and he can't go more than a few minutes without stopping before he is winded enough to be breathing hard, his hand gripped around the front of his jacket as he struggles to keep up with Denmark's purposeful strides.

The Dane never lets him walk behind, however, and keeps a hand on him at all times; whether he has their fingers laced together or his palm flat against his shoulders, Denmark keeps him within reach and patiently stops every time Peter needs to take a break to catch his breath or rest his feet. After so much time spent in inactivity in the shelter, his legs are burning. The blanket of ash on the ground makes the road look soft, but each step goes straight through his worn shoes and by the time they stop for lunch, he is sure he won't be able to go much further.

Denmark pulls him to sit down on top of an old tire and motions for him to lift his foot. "We're gonna need to find you some different shoes," he mumbles as he inspects the soles of the old sneakers. "If you step on any nails or anything, they're gonna go right through your foot." He sets Peter's leg down and lets his pack slip off of his shoulder and onto the ground beside him. He flips the top open and pulls a half empty bottle of water from the front pocket along with a granola bar, which he snaps down the middle and hands to him. "Here."

Sealand takes it and pulls his bandana down enough to nibble on it while he watches Denmark open the map again and drag his finger along the road they are on. He keeps his half of the bar balanced on his knee and after a moment, he unwinds his head wrap and begins

to eat as well, shifting to sit next to Peter and drawing the map up into both of their laps.

"Do you know how to read a map?"

Peter nods. "Arthur showed me a long time ago." He points to Poland. "We're going North-East right?"

"Right," Denmark grins around the granola bar held between his teeth. "And do you know how to tell which way is North without a compass?"

"Yeah. Finland taught me how to use a stick and the sun to do it, but I know how to do it with a watch too." He crumples up the wrapper and stuffs it away in his pocket. "I don't have a watch though. Is the sun even ever out enough to use shadows?"

"Nope." Denmark polishes off the last of his bar and folds the map back up. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves a small, plastic compass and presses it into his hands. "It's not always completely accurate, but it's better than nothing." He smiles. "Why don't you carry it?"

He takes it, hesitantly, and looks down at it. The surface is cracked and smeared with ash, but the red arrow is still in one piece and pointing in the right direction. "What if I lose it?"

Denmark pats his knee and stands up. "You won't lose it." He begins to rewind the sheet over his mouth, pausing to wipe his goggles off with one corner. Once he's tucked it down, he stoops down and picks up his bag again, taking Peter's as well before he can protest. "Your feet hurt, right? I can carry it."

Sealand huffs and scoots off of the deflated tire. "My feet are fine," he grumbles. "I can carry my own backpack." He extends his arm to take it, but Denmark shakes his head and just takes his hand in his own and starts to pull him back toward the road.

"You've only been outside for a day. You gotta get used to it before you can push yourself too hard. If you go too fast, you'll hurt yourself." He gives him a friendly elbow. "First rule of the end of the world: only strain yourself when you have to. It's not worth it to screw yourself up over something little when you're gonna need to be in top shape when it counts."

Sealand carefully steps over the edge of the broken pavement. "How am I supposed to know when it counts?"

"You'll know."

Despite Denmark's optimism, they don't quite make it as far as they had hoped, and when it begins to get dark, he informs Peter that it's time to call it a day and they cautiously climb over precarious pieces of broken concrete to set up camp beneath what is left of a highway overpass. Between their frequent stops to rest and avoidance of the major roads, they haven't covered much ground, but they have put enough space between themselves and the bunker that Peter gets a certain feeling of finality every time he looks back and can only see the murky gray behind them. He isn't quite sure if it's a good feeling or not, but it makes his stomach hurt to think about how much further they have to go still.

It's gotten much colder now that night has started upon them and as he watches Denmark unpack their bedding inside the partially closed box of rubble, he can't help the shivers that ghost over his arms and legs. He tucks his legs up to his chest and tries to nonchalantly huddle into himself, but the gesture does not go unnoticed by the Dane and as soon as he has laid out the few blankets that they have, he shrugs out of his long trench coat and drapes it around Peter's shoulders.

"We should try to find a trading post tomorrow." He flops down next to Peter, crossing his legs, and pulls his pack into his lap, rummaging through it and inspecting several items. "We should be able to trade something in here for a coat and a pair of boots for you."

"Trading post?"

"Mm. A lot of big cities have 'em. Not everybody has lost their mind yet and sometimes you can find people with all kinds of scavenged shit that they want to trade." He pulls out a pair of binoculars and turns them over in his hand before shaking his head and putting them back. "They're kind of like flea markets, I guess. It's mostly just a bunch of people with a bunch of soggy boxes full of stuff they drug out of old department stores."

"Why don't we just find a department store?" He yawns and shifts closer to Denmark. "Wouldn't that be safer?"

"Yeah, but at this point, it's unlikely we'd find anything. Munich has a huge population and everyone pretty much looted the stores into the ground. Once we get further out, we'll stop to look in grocery stores and whatever else we find, but it's a pretty fruitless effort here."

His eyes droop and he starts to tip over against Denmark. "Oh."

Denmark slings an arm around his shoulder and scoops him up with the other, carefully stepping over the uneven ground to where he has set up their blankets. He sets Peter down and pulls the thin stack of covers over him, adjusting the large coat to make sure it falls over his feet before turning back to get their bags and hanging them above on a sharp outcropping of wire.

"Y'can have your coat back…" Peter murmurs as Denmark lies down beside him. "M'not that cold."

Denmark's quiet laugh is warm on the back of his neck. "Yeah you are. You're still shiverin'."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Sealand sighs deeply and gives up on arguing and settles for just rolling over to face Denmark, raising a curious eyebrow when his eyes adjust to the darkness. He has a strip of fabric tied around his nose and mouth. "You're gonna sleep with that on?" He shifts up slightly. "We're not in the ash."

"Habit."

"Should I…?"

"It's not a bad idea." He reaches into his pants pocket and fishes out a different bandana, one that isn't coated in the grime from walking all day. He reaches around Peter's head and gingerly ties it behind his ears. "If you can't sleep with it on, you can just pull the blankets over your head. It'll do about as much good."

"Why don't you just do that?"

Denmark shrugs. "I'm too tall. You can do it though."

Peter reaches around his head to secure the knot a little tighter and nods. "I'm okay." He pauses while Denmark rolls over onto his back, guilt creeping into his belly when he can feel him shivering through the pile of blankets over them. After a moment, he sighs angrily and wriggles closer to him and spreads the coat over them both.

"You're breaking your own rule, idiot," he mutters. "Stop being stupid."

He doesn't even need to see to know that Denmark is smirking when he rolls over and catches Peter around his waist and pulls him in to a smothering hug. "You sound like Norway." He trails off for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. "Actually, you sound like all of them," he laughs quietly. "The calling me stupid thing, I mean."

Peter frowns. "It's your own fault for giving them so much to call you stupid over."

"I know."

A long, awkward silence stretches between them for several minutes before Denmark's arms just barely tighten around Peter's waist and he tilts his head down enough to allow the blankets to brush over his ears.

"We'll find them," he says sternly. "We're gonna find them."

"Yeah..." Sealand bites his lip and squeezes Denmark's shaking hand.

"I know."

# of 20

Ahhh, sorry, everyone, the formatting is a little wonky in the last few chapters. I'm still trying to figure this whole thing out. Please bear with me!

Though Denmark continues to ooze optimism, it takes them over a week before they finally find a trading post.

In the days leading up to its discovery, they do little more than walk at the same steady pace, a pace often broken by Peter's need to stop and rest his feet every few kilometers until his weak legs finally begin to build up a tolerance after the fifth day when he is forced to haul himself over the jagged pieces of a broken bridge. Denmark offers to help him at every opportunity, helping him to balance or climb, even suggesting several times that Peter should ride on his back. And while he might appreciate the Dane's hand when they cross eerie, empty intersections or expanses of fallen buildings, he refuses each time he offers to carry him.

"I'm not a little kid!" Is his incensed reply each time and it is always met by Denmark smiling through his bandana and agreeing with him.

In the first several days of their journey, they keep a steady stream of conversation, kept up by Sealand's questions about where Denmark has been and what he has seen in what is left of the fractured land. Most of his questions are about nature and cities, not wanting to know about the people in them or what has become of them, but his curiosity soon bests him and he asks him about Spain and Italy and their quest to find surviving humans left in the rubble. Denmark answers him honestly and when he asks what became of Romano, he never pauses.

"He made it through the initial bursts," Denmark says to him as he yanks on the back door of an overturned semi truck. "The problem is

that everything was still on fire and he was too hurt to get out of Cosenza in time. Here, hand me the crowbar out of my bag, will you?"

"What happened to Cosenza?" He hands him the bar and stands behind, watching him force the doors open and hop inside.

"Burned up. It was still on fire by the time I got there, but there's not much left." He drags out a plastic crate full of small boxes and begins to tear them open, mouth turned down in a hard grimace when the smell of rotten vegetables floods the truck. "Spain tried to find him, but with that leg of his, he wasn't fast enough. He found Feliciano out of complete luck, but by the time he got to Romano, there wasn't even anything left to bury." He sighs and tosses the last box over his shoulder.

"Nothing worth taking in here."

His blunt answers at first bother him. Sweden had told him stories of before, when he, Denmark, and Norway had been together, and had described Denmark as being rather heartless, an adjective that seems fitting when his face never changes as he tells Sealand about the charred bodies in Venice and the gate made of bones at the Swiss border. Even when he speaks of the others, how thin Italy had become and how Spain relied on a heavy piece of metal to walk, his voice remains flat and detached and it grates at Peter until he eventually just asks why.

"You don't sound too upset about it," he tells him when they stop to rest by the remains of a dried up creek. He sits beside him and plays with the ash at his feet with a long stick, not particularly wanting to look at him when he draws out the map to mark their progress. "How can you be like that?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"I mean, you sound like you don't even care."

Denmark sighs and leans back against the tree trunk behind them. "Look, Peter, that's not it. You can't even imagine how much that isn't it."

"So…what is it then?"

"I'm old. Really old. I've seen a lot of awful things happen and this is how I've learned to deal with it. I've gotta be completely straight forward about things because if I try to sugarcoat it into something it isn't, it makes it even worse when the truth hits you in the face." He folds up the map and hands him a nearly empty bottle of water. "Y'get it?"

"I guess."

Denmark watches him curiously for a moment. "You guess?"

"It just makes stuff sound pretty hopeless." He turns the bottle over in his hands and stares into the black dirt. "S'not very motivating."

Denmark reaches over to clap a hand against his shoulder, turning him to look at him. "There's a difference between being blunt and giving up hope," he says seriously. "If anything, shit being bleak should be a better motivator for finding a reason to keep going. We're still here and as long as we're still breathing, hope is what we make it, whether it be digging out our people or walking for goddamn ever to find our family. As soon as you relinquish your reason for living, that'swhen it becomes hopeless." He motions to the water. "Now finish that off. You haven't had anything to drink today."

"Neither have you."

"Yes I have."

"When?"

"Before you woke up."

"Liar."

"Just drink it, will ya?"

Sealand sighs and twists the cap off. "I'll have half of it. You can have the rest." He brings the bottle to his lips, allowing it to hover, and stares fixedly at Denmark. "Deal?"

"All right, all right." He waits for Peter to drink his half before getting to his feet and taking it back. "You win."

As they begin to walk again, he tries not to notice when Denmark places the water back into the bag, untouched.

By the fifth day, they have reversed positions and Peter finds himself answering Denmark's questions. He cannot remember much of The Calamity and begins to wonder aloud when they make their way through the remains of an old airfield.

"Whaddya think happened to the planes that were in the air?"

"Some of 'em crashed," Peter tells him. "There was one that smashed into the ground a little ways from England's house."

"Was it still in one piece?"

"Kinda. It still had the wings and everything, but it was all melted together."

"Damn. Don't suppose I even need to ask if anyone made it out?"

"Doubt it."

Silence.

"Were you outside when it happened?"

"No," he sighs and finds himself tracing his steps along the raised bumps along the runway, the hard plastic warped but blindingly orange in the thick ash. "I was at England's house the whole time.

When the first flash happened, France couldn't even stand up and we had to pull him under a table to keep things from hitting him when they fell off of the shelves. When the second flash came, the roof caved in."

"It's kind of amazing it held up that long."

He nods. "We were all under the table with Francis, but I don't really remember what happened while we were there. I remember that it was just really, really hot and smelled really bad." He pauses. "England was talking a lot. He had a radio and kept trying to get help, but he talked to me a lot too. He kept waking me up." He scrunches his nose and steps over the melted helicopter blades stuck against the pavement, carefully walking around the downed craft. "It was annoying."

Denmark laughs and steps over them as well. "Coulda been worse… you could've been stuck with Alfred. He'd have talked your ear off."

"Yeah." He frowns and after a moment, turns to look up at Denmark. "Do you think he's okay?"

"Who, Arthur?"

"Yeah."

"Absolutely." He nods sternly. "If anyone could've beat their way through this bullshit, it's England." He grins and nudges Peter. "The old man is tougher than he looks. France too. I'm willing to bet you guys were all on the same boat and they just got dropped off at a different shelter. We'll probably run into them eventually if they brought 'em to Germany too. There are bunkers all over the place, it's just a matter of finding them."

Sealand is quiet for a long time. He holds on to Denmark's hand as they walk, focused on the ground, trying to swallow the squirming sensation in his stomach. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he

can recall a particular smell and after a few minutes, he sighs loudly and squeezes Denmark's hand. "I think France is dead."

"Why?"

"He never said anything when we were under the table."

"That doesn't mean he's dead, Peter."

"There was a smell after a few days…"

"It was probably just sulphur."

"It wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"I was born in World War II, remember?"

"Ah. Right."

Again, silence falls between them and it's only after they've left the airfield that Denmark cautiously continues. "Were you scared?"

Peter surprises himself when he has to think about his answer. "I don't remember."

A pause.

"Are you scared now?"

"Are you?"

"I asked you first."

"Yes. Are you?"

Denmark's hand tightens around his and he looks up into the miserable sky.

"More than I've ever been in my entire life."

After eight days of walking and camping, they finally find it.

At the base of a large hill, the valley opens up beneath them into a flat expanse of blue tarps and clear plastic, strung up on orange twine into a mismatched sort of tent-city along the muddy pipes of an old processing plant. They smell it before they see it; the air is choked with an acrid, chemical smell which proves to be smoldering tires in the center of the market, doused with lighter fluid and set ablaze only minutes before their arrival. The whole camp is surrounded by scorched hills and dilapidated factories and the tarps are fairly well hidden by the environment, nestled deep in the huge gouge below.

Even from their position on top of the hill, Peter can see many, many people.

Denmark crouches down and peers out through the binoculars for a good while before giving the okay and gripping Peter's hand, his expression serious when he tells him not to let go, no matter what.

"These places are dangerous," he says as they begin their descent down into the gorge. "People are here to trade, yeah, but they'll also steal if the opportunity makes its self known. That includes people." He looks down at him. "There are a lot of bad people who are gonna be waiting for stupid travelers. Don't let your guard down."

Wide eyed, he agrees and walks close to Denmark, extra careful to remain on his right side when they approach the market and are immediately greeted by throngs of yelling people who don't pay them much mind other than hungry glances. The smell of the burning tires is even worse when they step under the tarps. It mingles with the other scents; mold and the unwashed masses being the two strongest odors other than the foul mud that squelches up around their shoes, wet and sticky and gray with ash, reeking of sewage and clinging to their pant legs. As soon as they enter, he pulls his

bandana close to his face. It does little to block the smell, but it's better than nothing.

People of all ages have set up shop in the market. Some of them have laid out blankets and towels to sit on, wet boxes piled in awkward, tilted stacks in front of them while others just sit directly in the mud, blank faced and paranoid looking as they peddle their scavenged goods. Peter studies several of them as they pass. There isn't a single person that he can find who isn't marred in some way, some worse than others, but all emaciated and sallow, many missing pieces of themselves or raw with still healing scar tissue, still red and crisp around the edges. If any of them notice his staring, they don't try to stop him and their flat expressions do not change when they meet his gaze.

There is one woman, however, seated behind piles of old magazines and stuffed animals, who snarls at him, her wet, blistered lips curling back over black teeth when she catches him looking. It's enough to make him jump and he holds tighter to Denmark's arm, urging him to hurry past her stall, and he ceases with his people watching in favor of looking into the boxes instead.

Much of it is garbage. Soggy newspaper and broken toys seem to dominate the available items and it reminds him a bit of some kind of sick garage sale.

Denmark stops in front of an old man sitting on a striped beach towel and stoops down to paw through one of his boxes, pulling a ratty winter jacket from beneath a stack of moldy bibles. He inspects it for a moment and holds it up to Peter. It's a bit too big, but he nods in approval anyway and turns back to the man.

"Hey, old timer, whaddya want for this?"

The man blinks slowly and it takes Peter a moment to realize that both of his eyes are the same milky white as Denmark's left. "What is it?" He asks. His voice is rough and wheezy, breathless despite his

lack of motion, and he leans forward, his hand held out to touch the jacket.

Denmark shifts it forward for him to feel. "The coat. You willing to trade for it?"

The man hums and sits back again. "Y'sound like a big fella. Don't think it'll fit yeh."

"It's not for me." He nudges Peter and nods at the other man.

"Um…I need it." He shifts awkwardly and tries not to stare into his blank eyes. "I think it'll fit okay."

"Ah, you've got a boy with yeh. Your son?"

Denmark's eyes flit to glance at Peter. "Yeah."

"Yer a lucky one, ain'tcha? Both of yeh makin' it out." He turns down suddenly and dissolves into a fit of coughs, his chest heaving and sputtering like a broken fan and not even trying to trying to mask the harsh, hollow sound, his thin, white body rigid against his wracking breaths. After a moment, he spits red into the mud and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yeh can just take it," he wheezes. "Put it to some use, eh?"

Denmark frowns and hands the jacket to Sealand, dropping his shoulder to get into his pack. "I'm not just going to take it. That's hardly fair."

"My own's dead. Best it goes to a good kid." He bends down and feels his way along his boxes until he reaches a plastic milk crate. "Most just take without askin'. Yeh been walkin' much?"

"We have. We're coming from Munich."

"Yeh from there?"

"No." He hesitates. "Denmark."

"That explains the accent then." He continues to rummage around in the crate. "M'from England m'self. Been stuck in Germany forever now. Came in on one'f the boats."

"Us too," Sealand says. "About a year ago."

"'bout the same as me, then. Y'tryin' t'get back home?"

"Yeah."

He snorts. "That was my plan too. Was doin' pretty good too."

Peter regards him curiously as he starts to throw bits of waterlogged paper out of the crate. "What stopped you?"

He laughs, hoarse and short, and stops his hunt long enough to slap his knee. "Same thing that stops 'em all. There's somethin' in the ash, y'know? Y'breathe too much of it and it shuts yeh down right quick." He taps his temple. "Starts wit' yer eyes and yer ears, then goes to yer legs. Can't go far if yeh can't see or walk, eh?" He coughs loudly. "Settles inta yer chest in the end. Takes yer lungs right outta yeh." He laughs again and turns the crate upside down into his lap, a scatter of bags dropping in front of him. "Don't know what it is, but everyone 'round here is dyin' of it."

Peter's breath hitches and he rounds on Denmark. He opens his mouth to speak, but the man interrupts him with a noisy hack. "Tell me, how old are yeh?"

Peter looks up at Denmark and then back down again. "Twelve," he says after a moment.

"Same as mine, then. Ah, here we go. See if these fit yeh." He pulls out a wet plastic bag and holds it out for one of them to take.

Sealand takes it and carefully unties the top, blinking in surprise when he pulls out a pair of dusty, but otherwise new looking, boots. Denmark looks just as shocked and turns back to the old man.

"You can't just let us take these," he says.

"Ain't got no use for 'em." He turns in Peter's general direction. "Well, go on. Try 'em, do they fit?"

He toes off his mud soaked sneaker and slips on one of the boots, momentarily letting go of Denmark's hand to lace them up. "Yeah," he says. He looks at Denmark, unsure if he should be happy or not. "They fit perfectly."

"Good, good. Take 'em then."

While Peter puts the other on, Denmark roots through his pack, pulling out a can of baked beans and a knitted scarf full of holes and flecked with ash. He leans forward and drapes the scarf around the man's neck, pressing the can into his hands. "It's a pop top, so you don't need a can opener," he says quietly. "I know it's not a lot, but…"

The man waves him off. "Don't want'cher pity. M'doin' fine." He tries to push the beans back to Denmark, but misses by several feet and drops it into the mud, cursing when he hears it splat into the wet ground.

Denmark sighs and picks it up, again placing it in his lap. "Just take it. I can't just let you give us this." He pauses and gently squeezes the man's shoulder. "Thank you. We really needed this stuff."

"Think nothin' of it." He waits, listening as Denmark helps Peter into the large coat, zipping it up and arranging the hood over his head. Once he's tucked the windbreaker back away in his pack and resituated his own coat, he again takes Peter's hand and they start down the rows of stalls again. The man waves to them. "Take care of yer boy."

Denmark nods. "I will."

They don't spend much longer in the camp. They stop by two other booths and Denmark trades a small gardening spade for a moth bitten pair of wool socks and a soggy sketchbook, both of which he places in Peter's backpack. They peruse the other boxes, Sealand silent, but find nothing else of use and soon take their leave of the market, leaving the reeking tarps behind them as they head for the hill back to the road.

As they begin the slow climb back to the street, it takes all of his willpower to ignore Denmark's foggy eye and the hard, uneven limp in his step.

# of 20

Note: the formatting for my stories is always done for livejournal, so they tend to look kind of funny when uploaded here. To combat that, I recommend viewing it at the 3/4 format, which you can do by clicking the little "3/4" button in the upper right hand corner. :D

They make camp several hours after leaving the flea market in a huge, overturned concrete pipe. A heavy leftover from one of the many factories in the surrounding area, they find it by chance, just a gray edge poking through tangles of weeds and mud, and though they both could have walked a good deal longer, Denmark deemed it time to break for the day on the grounds that finding better shelter would be unlikely. He immediately sets to laying out their belongings in the center of the tube before Sealand can vote yay or nay on the dirty, old thing.

"It's still pretty early," he says after they've both eaten. "Wanna learn how to load the rifle?"

Tired as he is, the prospect of firearm education perks him right up and he nods, enthusiastic, and wiggles out of his goggles and hood while Denmark pulls the rifle up and moves to the front of the pipe where the smallest bit of light still trickles in through the web of overgrown roots. He motions for Peter to sit down in front of him and circles his arms around his waist, the rifle set in the boy's lap, and points to the base of the forestock.

"All right, first things first. Before y'can shoot it, there has to be bullets in it."

"Duh."

"Quiet you." He turns the gun sideways and points to a small latch at the head of the trigger guard. "Now, this one has a built in magazine,

so you have to load it manually. Just switch that and the plate will swing out."

"Okay…" Peter follows his instructions and the plate pops open, two rounds dropping into his lap. Denmark picks them up and holds them in his hand while he continues.

"Next, you have to clear out your chamber." He draws Peter's hand up to close around the bolt handle. "Open up the breech by pulling the bolt up and then as far back as it'll go." He guides their hands back. "Like that."

Sealand nods and Denmark lets him try it by himself, humming in approval when he gets it back on his first try and ejects the unused cartridge. Denmark catches it in his palm and sets it down in front of them.

"Good job. Okay, loading it is pretty easy. All you have to do is push them down into the magazine. This one holds five bullets, but since we've only got three, you can load them all." He demonstrates once. "See? Piece of cake. Now you try it."

"Finland showed me how to do this once on a newer rifle," he says quietly as he carefully presses the second round in. "It was a lot smoother."

"Yeah, well, this one is a piece of shit. I found it in the back of a boat house, so you can't really expect much." He's quiet for a moment, watching as Peter loads the last round and snaps the plate back in place. "Tell you what, though, I don't know a single person who can load a rifle faster than Tino. He and I used to go shooting sometimes and I'd always leave embarrassed because he'd show me up like you wouldn't believe."

"He said you were a piss-poor shot."

"Watch your mouth." He turns the rifle back over. "And I am. I don't like guns."

"How come?"

"They just aren't my style." He says sourly. "I spent so long fighting with swords and axes that when guns came along, they just weirded me out. They still do. Anyway, next thing you do is just push the bolt forward as far as it goes and then close it up. That'll strip a bullet from the magazine and you'll be good to fire it as long as the safety is off."

"Is the safety off?"

"Fuck no. You're twelve."

"I am not!"

He rolls his eyes. "Okay, fine, you *look* twelve. Now here, sit up." He swats at Peter until he fixes his posture and guides him to wrap his right hand around the grip. "Never put your finger into the trigger guard until you're ready to fire, got it?" He pulls his left hand to hold the front of the guard and draws it back against his shoulder. "Keep it locked in this position, right against your shoulder, nice and firm. Good." He lets go of Peter's hands and lets him hold it himself, adjusting to the weight and getting it into a comfortable position. "If you can, try to remember to breathe when you shoot it. It'll help you keep your balance and it'll make your shot a helluva lot more accurate than it would be if you were panicking."

Peter nods and practices shouldering the rifle several times. "I wish I could try actually shooting it."

"Me too. But those three are the only rounds I've got. We need to save 'em."

"You haven't been able to find any more?"

"Nope. That's why it's so important to not waste the ones we have." He sighs and leans back a bit. "It used to be that I had two for emergencies and one for me, but now it's just one for emergencies."

Peter goes rigid. "What do you mean one for you?"

"You know what I mean. Just in case."

He swallows thickly and hands the rifle back to him, both of them crouching down and crawling back into the center of the pipe where their bedding is. "And now you only have one for emergencies because one's for…for-"

"For you."

Denmark sets the gun down beside them and lies down. After Peter joins him, he draws the blankets up and yawns when the boy curls up next to him and lays his head against his shoulder, tucking himself close and settling awkwardly in the cramped space. As the last of the daylight fades, Sealand goes quiet and taps a finger against his knuckles, heart fluttering anxiously.

"Hey, Denmark?" He asks, soft enough not to echo against the walls. "I don't think I could ever shoot myself."

"That's okay."

"It is?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because if the time comes, I'll do us both."

That takes the breath out of him. "Y-you would do that? You'd kill me?"

Denmark nods. "If it meant saving you from something worse."

He sighs at Sealand's startled silence and brings a hand up to ruffle the boy's hair. "Don't take it the wrong way. It's not exactly a task I want to do and things would have to be absolutely unsalvageable to

make me do it. There are very, very few situations that I can think of that would ever put me in that position."

"Like what?"

"That's a pretty grim question, don't y'think?"

"Just tell me."

He exhales slowly, thinking. "If we were about to be caught by bad people and there was no escape, I'd do it."

"Because the alternative is worse?"

"Absolutely."

A pause.

"Do you think the bad people will ever catch us?"

This time, it is Denmark that falls silent. After a moment, he turns onto his side and pulls Peter into his arms, pressing his cheek to the top of his head.

"If they do, I'll never let them touch you."

"So…do you think they will?"

Denmark sighs again and hugs him a little tighter.

"Go to sleep, Peter."

It is late into the afternoon on an especially cold day when an accident occurs.

With the trading post several days behind them, they have found their way into a small town that, compared to the other cities they have passed through, is still in relatively good condition, most of the

buildings still upright despite their charred, ash smeared exteriors and the pavement of the main street is still flat and even enough to walk in a straight line. After having been through so many dilapidated, ruined communities, to find one in tact has an eerie feeling to it and Peter can't help the nervousness that bubbles in him when they come upon the town. From on top of the hill, he can't see much more beyond the fact that it is still standing, but Denmark stops him and just stares into the distance for a long time before squeezing Sealand's hand and leading him down to the streets.

"Stay close," he tells him. "With this much still in good shape, there are bound to be people living here."

Peter nods and keeps his eyes open for any sign of movement along the main drag. The streets are choked with trackless ash, undisturbed except by their own feet, but there is a light breeze that seems to blow in a consistent stream around them, through the bent lamp posts and broken windows, a bare breath of wind that swirls the dust into resettling every few minutes. The main street seems deserted, but when Denmark turns around and finds that their own footprints are disappearing in their wake, neither of them believe for a moment that they are alone.

They keep close to the walls of buildings as they walk, slow and careful, and Denmark always stops at intersections to throw rocks into the streets, breaking the snowy silence and waiting tensely for any break in the stillness before continuing on. They cross the street sparingly to keep out of the open and check every corner before they round it, but no life makes its presence known to them.

The town is seemingly devoid of humankind.

From somewhere in the distance, they can hear something flap in the wind, but the ash is too thick to see that far ahead. Or farther than a block, even. He has not seen visibility this poor in any of the other cities they have crossed through and he is quite certain that if he were to let go of Denmark's hand and get separated from him, they would not be able to find each other quietly.

"How come the ash is so bad here?" Peter asks softly when they stop at another intersection and Denmark peers into the shattered window of an old post office. "It doesn't smell like anything is on fire."

"I don't know…there's probably something big burning in the next city over. Maybe a forest or something." He pauses and draws away from the building. "I don't understand it. There are so many places to hole up here but there's just nothing. No people, no animals, zip."

They begin to walk again.

"Maybe they're all hiding," Peter suggests. "There are lots of buildings left, so…?"

"I dunno…I just feel like we would have seen someone by now. Or the remains of someone." He nods at the empty gutters on the street. "Usually there are at least bodies on the roads but this place is totally clean."

"What if there's a bunker? Like, an underground one?"

He hums thoughtfully. "Maybe. That still doesn't explain the streets. Most of the underground shelters have a burn pit outside the doors for getting rid of bodies, but there's no reason why they would have come all the way out to pull people out of the town. What's the point if nobody is living on the surface?"

Sealand doesn't have an answer for that.

They stop again at an intersection on the edge of town and Denmark points to a large building across the street. "That place was a cannery," he says. "We should take a look to see if there's anything left inside."

Peter swallows nervously. He has not yet looted a building and the long, two-story structure seems much more foreboding than a fruit plant ever should be. He follows Denmark across the street and holds onto the rifle while the older man cracks the back door open

with the crowbar, keeping watch while Denmark has his back turned. The wood is old and gives easily, the loud splinter echoing through the town when the hinges burst loose, swinging open into a dark, dust swathed office. Denmark slides the crowbar back into his pack and shoulders the gun as he steps into the room.

"We should head upstairs," he says after a moment of rifling through the desk and finding nothing of use. "That's probably where they did everything."

Sealand looks up from an ashy stack of old magazines on the coffee table and holds one of them up. "Can I take one of these?"

"Sure, whatever you want. What is it?"

"I dunno, a nature magazine or something." He shifts his backpack to his front and tucks the issue away alongside the now dry sketchbook Denmark had gotten for him. He hasn't drawn anything in it yet, not wanting to waste the ink in Denmark's only pen.

They make their way into the main shipping area of the first floor where they find a tall staircase leading up to the packing quarter. There is less dust here but the darkness is no less intimidating as they begin to cautiously climb up, Peter following close behind Denmark and holding tightly to the back of his bag to keep from getting separated in the narrow space. The landing opens up into a wide, dimly lit production line where a thin conveyer belt is still connected to a squat machine full of glass jars and sheets of tin, overturned crates and bins just beneath them on the greasy floor.

It reeks of rotten fruit.

"There isn't going to be anything fresh left," Denmark coughs and pulls his goggles up onto his forehead. There is enough ash layered on his face that Peter can see a perfect imprint of the mask around his eyes. "Let's check around and see if we can find a store room or anywhere that might have stuff that was already canned."

He reluctantly lets go of Denmark's hand and steps into the center of the room. The floor squeaks under his boots each time he takes a step, amplified by the stifling silence, but he doesn't pay it much mind. He has to stay focused on the task at hand. The ghostly building is too unnerving and too quiet and he has no intention of dallying longer than he has to, especially when he notices the tiny rat tracks in the dust. He sweeps his eyes over the entirety of the floor and is not surprised when he finds little more than fruit pits and can labels strewn about along the walls, blown into piles by the wind from the broken windows and left to rot with the sticky remains of what Peter thinks may have been peaches or apricots.

A stack of boxes in the corner of the room catches his interest. Like everything else, they are coated in a layer of grime, but even through the dust and ash, he can see shipping labels printed and taped to their sides, little open flaps on the sides for easy carrying. He squints through the low light, stepping closer.

Through the handles, he can just barely see the reflective surface of glass.

He grins widely and starts for the boxes. "Hey, I found so-"

He is cut short by his foot disappearing through the floor.

He barely has time to scream Denmark's name before he is drowned out by the shrieking of wood splinting, the floor splitting beneath him, and he finds nothing but open space under his feet. He scrabbles for something, anything, but the rotten, slick floor opens up faster than he can manage, throwing him forward and smashing his chin against the edge before he falls through.

He stays in a freefall for a split second.

His ears register the sound of something crunching before he feels his entire body jerk up and swing, hovering in midair, and he forces his eyes open just as something green flies past him and crashes into the floor; Denmark's pack. Above him, Denmark is on his side on

the edge of the floor and has a hand fisted around the hook of Sealand's backpack, the other gripped tightly to the leg of the canning machine, both thin arms obviously straining against the weight of keeping them from falling.

"Peter!" He grits loudly. "Can you reach the ledge?"

He has to fight to keep the raging panic out of his voice. "N-no…!" He can hear Denmark curse and shrieks when the floor creaks ominously. "I-it's going to break again!"

"Fuck, I know, hold on!" He rolls over onto his stomach. "Hold on to my hand, all right? I'm going to pull you up. When you get to the edge, try to get your feet over it."

Peter's hands fly up to grip Denmark's bony wrist and he holds his breath when the older man begins to haul him up, inch by inch, groaning as he struggles to force himself backward, away from the jagged ledge and back toward the conveyer belt. All the while, the floor continues to creak and moan and it takes all of Peter's self control not to scream at Denmark to hurry up, settling instead to stare up pleadingly at his tense face, creased with effort and grimacing hard. His eyes snap open when another loud crack echoes through the room and he gives one last enormous heave, yelling through his teeth and dragging Peter over the edge just as the floor opens up again and swallows the boxes, the sound of shattering glass and smashing tile exploding through the entire building when they land on the first floor.

He falls forward against Denmark's chest and they both tip back against what is left of the landing. Peter shakes like a leaf when he pushes himself up and turns around to look at the huge hole in the floor while the dust settles and the factory eases back into silence. He squeezes the front of Denmark's jacket.

Don't cry… he thinks to himself. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry…*

A high-pitched whine suddenly sounds in the distance.

It starts slow and quiet, stilted like it can't quite make it, but builds until it is a harsh wail that drowns out anything else. It's a static sound, like an old recording amplified on stereo speakers.

A siren.

Denmark shoots to his feet. "We have to go," he says quickly. "We have to go *now* ."

Peter looks up at his stricken face, yelping when Denmark grabs his arm with a rough hand and begins to drag him toward the stairs. "W-why?" They start to hurry down to the first floor and he stumbles on the last step. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Not now. Keep moving."

As they pass the pile of wreckage on the ground floor, Peter tugs on the back of Denmark's coat and tries to pull him back. "What about your bag?" He cries. He gestures frantically at the rubble burying the pack. "Everything is in your bag!"

Denmark rounds on him and yanks him forward. "Leave it!" He yells. "We'll replace it later!"

They burst through the back door and immediately, Denmark breaks into a dead run. He keeps his hand clamped around Sealand's, but does not slow down when Peter struggles to keep up with him, instead opting to half-drag him whenever he falters, pulling him through the streets back toward the edge of town which is just beginning to darken with the first hints of nightfall. They don't stop at the intersections or check any windows this time and when Peter does chance a glance behind him, he nearly falls flat on his face.

On the opposite end of the main street, a huge truck is idling, spewing black smoke into the air, a red siren spinning on top of the cab. He can't see much more than its headlights through the ash, but he can hear its engine rumbling and he can hear the sound of people yelling and whooping after them.

Something hot whistles past his cheek and shatters the window of a car parked on the sidewalk.

"Keep running!" Denmark yells at him when he screams.

Peter is nowhere near about to question him this time.

The engine of the truck roars and it begins to trundle down the street just as they make it back to the ramps to the highway. They weave through several dead vehicles before they make it to the main stretch and from there, they jump the guard rail and race into the wooded area that lines the road, boots thudding against the sodden soil and foliage whipping against their faces. They run into the trees until they can no longer hear the truck, but even then, Denmark doesn't stop. They continue in a zig-zag pattern through the woods, chests heaving, and Peter's lungs are burning when Denmark pulls him down a ravine and they reappear on the other side of the woodland onto another highway.

Denmark grabs the door of the first car he finds and yanks it open, unceremoniously throwing Peter inside before jumping in as well, hiding the boy away beneath himself, a hand placed behind his head and the other pulling the rifle up beside them.

"Don't move." He whispers harshly.

He holds stone still except for his ragged breaths, Peter clinging to him, and for several minutes, they lie in wait, listening intently for the sound of footsteps or engines or gunshots.

Nothing comes.

It's only after Peter realizes how uneven Denmark's breathing is that he pushes himself up and turns to face the other man. The Dane's face is as white as chalk despite having run so far and his eyes are pinched shut beneath his sweat soaked bangs, hard wheezes forced through his teeth as he shakily sits up and stumbles out of the car,

Peter trailing behind him, scooting forward to sit on the edge of the seat while Denmark braces himself against the car.

"A-are you okay?" Peter asks, frowning in concern.

Denmark grips the front of his coat and nods, unsteady. He starts to say something, a hint of a smile on his lips, but his eyes blow wide before he can even begin and he pitches forward against the car door. He drops to his knees, clutching his chest and lurching ahead, both hands planted against the pavement when a violent cough shudders through his body hard enough that he jerks forward, collapsing onto his elbows. Peter gasps and scrambles to his feet, moving at once to help him up, but he stops dead in his tracks directly in front of the trembling Dane.

The concrete is splattered with red.

TCB.

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Little else makes Sealand more nervous than the sight of blood does. Spiders are high up on his list, as is Arthur's cooking and Berwald's 'time out box', if only because it means he has done something wrong and is trouble. He doesn't mind being scolded so much, words are only words and carry little water, after all, and really, his parental figures have off methods of punishment to begin with. In many ways, he has no reason to complain. Latvia has it much worse if his tremors are any indication and he knows Wy has been known to stand in the corner for hours at a time after any misbehavior. So, really, his list only truly consists of spiders and blood.

Blood doesn't just make him nervous. Growing up when he did, the mere sight of it makes his chest tighten and his muscles seize up until it is cleaned up or he is pulled far enough away to be unable to see, smell, or feel it. He hates the shade of it. The copper laden scent as well. Even small paper cuts put him in a poor state should they yield tiny beads and he is always careful to keep band-aids with him just in case such a thing should occur while playing or sneaking into meetings. He just doesn't like it; it's nothing but a reminder of the war to him and while he may have never exactly been on the front lines, it brings the ghost of England in his pressed uniform, looking harrowed and bruised while he tried to hide his injuries.

He doesn't like blood because it reminds him of how vulnerable they actually are.

This time is no different. The first cough is hard enough that he doesn't even see the way the blood splatters in small line of stippled dots at his feet, only that it is a sudden and unwelcome contrast to everything else around them. It's an angry stripe of blatant, wet red in their otherwise gray, dusty little world and it halts him immediately in front of Denmark, wide-eyed with the front of his coat clutched in his hands as he watches him nearly lose his balance in another

violent shudder. He wants to move. He wants to step over the line of red and touch Denmark, but his feet are rooted firm, and he only watches Denmark clamp a hand over his mouth, still on his elbows and knees, trying to regain his breath but only coughing harder until the red is staining his palm and dribbling out between his fingers. This blood drops to the concrete in perfect little spheres, somehow more graceful than the first furious arc, but no less mortifying.

Peter swallows hard and tries to move forward with no success. Denmark has his eyes pinched shut, but keeps trying to say something, words that are immediately lost in the hollow, wet rattling of his chest, and Peter is pretty sure he is trying, and failing, to wave it off. Probably trying to tell him to not pay it any mind.

Too stupid to ask for help.

He bites the inside of his cheek and finally forces himself to step over the splatters of blood just as Denmark starts to get his composure back. He stays on his knees and bows his head between his arms, hand dropped away from his mouth onto the street, leaving another streak as he draws it back to shakily push himself upright, and spits into the ash. More red in the gray.

"We have to keep moving," he rasps. His boots scrape against the concrete when he wobbles to his feet. "Gotta keep moving."

Peter grabs his dusty coat sleeve and stares up at him seriously. "What was that?" He asks, quiet and trying still not to panic. "What's wrong with you?"

Denmark wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Nothing. There isn't anything wrong with me. Now come on, it's going to be dark in a few hours and we don't have our pack. We need to go."

He moves to try and hold Peter's hand. This action, for whatever reason, ignites anger in him that overpowers his anxiety by tenfold and he snatches his hand away. "No!" He cries. "Not until you tell me what's wrong with you!" He fists Denmark's jacket and yanks him

forward, stumbling, to the open car door where he pushes him to sit down, surprised at how easy a task it is. He pushes down on Denmark's shoulders and pulls back just enough to search his face, carefully blank, and bites his lip. "You're sick, aren't you?"

Denmark says nothing.

"You have what that old man has."

Again, silence.

Peter balls his hands and takes a step back. "Answer me!" He yells. "Tell me what's wrong with you!"

"Peter." Denmark's voice is flat and he reaches out again to take his hand. "Don't shout. Those people might still be looking for us." He winds their fingers together and stares intently at him while pulling him closer again. "And I'm *fine.* I'm still walking, ain't I?" He tries to smile but barely manages a thin smirk. "You don't gotta worry."

For a moment, Peter just gapes at him, furious, before he snaps their hands apart. " *Stop* doing that! Stop pretending nothing's wrong!" He shoves his palm in front of Denmark's face.

Each finger of his glove is dappled with blood.

"You can't just ignore it when something's wrong with you!"

Denmark just looks at his outstretched hand for a long moment. He still wears the same cautiously expressionless face as he contemplates an answer and after several terse beats, he finally sighs and lays the rifle out in his lap.

"I don't know what's wrong," he says. "It's just like this sometimes."

"Like what?"

"Hard to breath. Hard to walk."

Sealand swallows. "Does it happen a lot?"

"Problems breathing?"

"No."

"Oh." Denmark turns his palm over and looks at the red stains in his gloves. "That." He wipes his hand on his pants. "Sometimes."

"How often?"

"Peter-"

"Tell me!"

He exhales noisily. "I don't know. Sometimes. Whenever I run too much." He runs a hand through his hair and looks at him. "But I told you; you don't gotta worry about me. I'm dealing with it and I'm gonna be fine."

Sealand scowls. "Until you go blind and can't walk anymore and you die."

"I'm not going to die."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do."

"How?"

"I have to take care of you." He manages a lopsided smile. "I can't die until I know you're safe."

"How are you supposed to do that if you can't breathe?"

Denmark doesn't have an answer for that.

Peter crouches down and angrily swings his backpack around to his front and begins to rummage around in it. "Papa Berwald and Uncle Norway were right. You're so stupid." He pulls out a greasy pillowcase and stands back up, stalking over to stand in front of Denmark and yanking something black out of the case and snapping it over his face before he can protest. "Wear this."

Denmark blinks at him and brushes his fingers against the smooth, dark plastic of the mask over his mouth and nose. His brow comes together and even without seeing his whole face, Peter knows that he is frowning.

"You had a respirator mask this whole time?" He asks, the anger in his voice muffled by the mask. "Why haven't you been wearing it?"

"I got it from a kid from Poland who was in the bunker with me." He crosses his arms and glares defiantly at Denmark. "And I wasn't wearing it because I was saving it for an emergency."

"You stupid little…you need to put this on right now!" He starts to remove it. "If I would've known you had this, I wouldn't have been dragging you around in the ash with a fucking bandana."

Peter darts forward and slaps his hands away from the mask's straps. "No! I'm giving it to you." He shoves Denmark's hands into his lap and forces the bag of spare filters between his fingers. "You're the one barfing up blood, not me."

"Peter, it's not safe to be walking around with just a rag over your mouth. If you wear this, it'll keep you protected until we can get somewhere safe." He starts to reach for the ties again.

This time, Sealand grabs his wrists and just holds them in mid-air, a pained expression on his face as he stares down at him. "I can't find anywhere safe without you, stupid." He pauses and lets go of his hands just long enough to wrap his arms around Denmark's neck and hug him tightly. "I don't want you to die…" he whispers. "I don't wanna be alone anymore. I can't do this by myself. I…I…" he sniffles

and presses his face into the ash streaked crook of Denmark's neck. "Please don't die, uncle Denmark."

He feels Denmark's arms circle his back and he sighs heavily from somewhere above him. "I already told you, I'm not gonna die." He leans his chin down on the top of Sealand's head and lets his eyes drop shut. "If I agree to wear it, will you calm down and keep moving?"

He sniffs and pulls away, nodding vigorously.

Denmark's eyes soften and he gets unsteadily to his feet again, a hand coming down to ruffle Peter's hair. "All right, fine. But if we go through really bad areas, I want you to wear it, got it? We'll share it."

Peter nods again. "You'll wear it a lot though, right? Even when you sleep?"

"Yeah, yeah," he sighs and reaches back behind his head, adjusting the elastic straps until the mask is secured in an airtight seal around the lower half of his face. "Sheesh, you're as bad as Finland."

"That's a lie and you know it."

"You're just on a roll today, aren't you?"

"One of us has to be." He pulls his hood back up and slips his goggles down over his burning eyes, watching Denmark do the same. "So what do we do now?"

"Good question. What do you have in your pockets?"

Peter empties his coat pockets and produces only the compass and a wadded up bandana. Denmark's jacket doesn't yield much more but, thankfully, he still has their map.

"What else do you have in your backpack?" He asks.

"A few ration bars, that sketchbook and the socks you got me, that magazine, and a blanket from my bed in the bunker."

"Fuck. All right, hang on to all of that for now." He turns his head up to the sky and makes a nervous sound in the back of his throat. "It's getting dark too fast. We aren't going to make it much further tonight and I really don't think we're going to find anything of use until tomorrow and that includes a place to sleep." He holds his hand out for Peter to take and they begin walking, Denmark wincing with each step. "We'll keep to the main road for now and try to put as much distance between us and them as we can. I know it's not ideal, but as soon as it gets dark, we'll get into the trunk of one of these cars until morning."

Sealand's eyes widen. "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yes."

"What if they find us?"

"I'll kill them."

He grips Denmark's hand tightly. "What if you can't?"

"Stop being so morbid, would ya?" Denmark shoots, turning sharply to look down at him. "As long as we're careful, we'll be fine. The roads here are too fucked up for them to take their truck on, which means they'd have to be looking for us on foot. And if that were the case, don't y'think we'd have heard them by now?" He nods firmly and turns his focus back to weaving through the cars. "We just have to be extra cautious for a while."

"How long?"

Denmark shrugs.

"Forever, probably."

True to Denmark's prediction, they don't cover much distance before the sun begins to sink into the ash. They're moving too slow; Denmark's joints ache and he limps along beside Peter, determined, but dragging and breathing hard, a change of pace when he is the one who must struggle to keep up. The mask does see to help. Peter notices that while he may be breathing a lot, each inhalation is quieter and more restrained with very little coughing in between. It's a bare improvement, but an improvement nonetheless. However the going is still too slow and after less than five kilometers, when they only have a sliver of daylight left, Denmark finally throws in the towel and they begin searching for a suitable vehicle to sleep in for the night.

"Look for something that looks beat up," Denmark instructs him. "Something newer though. It's gotta have a trunk release handle inside."

They step through the rows of broken down cars along the highway before deciding on a black BWM that is partially melted into the pavement, the front tires and hood drooped together like a wax sculpture and stuck to the road in a way that reminds Peter of a snail crawling along a branch. Denmark reaches in through the broken front window to unlatch the trunk and it groans open just enough for Peter to haul it up.

"We gotta make sure it works," Denmark says and crosses back to the end of the car. "You want to test it or should I?"

"I can." While Denmark holds the trunk lid open, Peter climbs inside. After being shut in, he tugs on the little handle and the trunk pops right back up, a rain of ash fluttering out of the creaky hinges, making him sneeze. "It works." Peter sits up and holds it open again while Denmark goes back to the drivers seat and wrenches the manual latch off, rendering it useless before hurrying back and fishing a small screwdriver out of his pocket. He crouches down and slams the head of the tool into several inconspicuous places along the lid, making a few holes before getting into the trunk as well, the lid clicking shut just as the last of the day vanishes.

The space in cramped and it's an awkward task to get settled. He eventually parks himself on Denmark's chest and by the time they both manage to stop squirming, he is pretty sure that he has whacked his head enough to cause permanent brain damage. Denmark's muffled laughter coincides with his uncomfortable groans and he flicks the older man's forehead.

"S'not funny," he grumbles. "This sucks."

"You think this sucks? Try having it happen in a Volkswagen with Sweden."

"What?"

"Yeah. Must've been about ten years ago. Finland and Norway got so sick of us bickering over dinner that they got us both drunk and locked us in the trunk of Iceland's rental car all night. Wouldn't let us out until we apologized to each other and promised to behave ourselves."

Sealand smirks. "What did you do?"

"Spent all night with his ass squished against my face."

"You didn't just apologize?"

"What? No way, that's lame. Besides, he started it."

"I doubt that."

"Shut up, you're biased." He sighs heavily and tips his head back against the fuzzy mat below him. "Kinda wish now that I would have, though."

"What were you arguing about?"

"I don't even remember. Probably something stupid."

"Definitely something stupid, you mean."

"What did I just say about shutting up?"

Peter folds his arms under his chin and rests on them. "So what happened? How did you get out?"

"Iceland returned us to the rental company and they heard us banging around. Some guy named Sven let us out and we had to hitch hike home." He laughs. "Nobody wanted to pick us up, though. We were all sweaty and gross from spending the entire night locked in a stupid trunk. I'm sure the old lady who finally gave us a ride thought we were serial killers or something."

"You, maybe. Sweden doesn't look like a serial killer."

Denmark's hands come up to squash Peter's face between his palms. "Okay, now I know you're *trying* to be biased."

Sealand wriggles out of his mashing and resettles himself with a huff. After a moment, he tilts his head to look at Denmark through the dark. "You don't think Sweden would kill anybody, do you?"

"What? Berwald? Nah, no way. Not unless he had to." He yawns. "He's a pretty chill guy these days. He'd only put somebody down if it were absolutely necessary. Why?"

"I dunno. I was just thinking I guess."

"About what?"

"Well…" he crosses his arms again, enough to prop himself up. "You said people went crazy and started killing each other, so I guess… I dunno."

"Nah, I get it." He shrugs. "And I wouldn't discredit it, either. With how weak we all are right now, I don't think there's a single one of us who isn't as susceptible to madness as any human is. But even then, I don't think you have to worry about anything…" he grins and ruffles Peter's hair. "Us Northern savages lost our minds a long time ago."

He nods slowly. "An' everyone's weak or dead because the land is dead, right?"

"That's a huge factor of it, I'm sure. Part of it is population, though." He makes a garbled sort of sound from somewhere behind the mask. "We're nothing without our people."

"But I'm…" Peter trails off and turns his head down. "Yeah."

Denmark tilts his head. "What were you going to say?" He asks curiously. "What are you thinking about?"

"Well, I'm just…if we need our people and our land to survive, then I should be dead, right? I could feel it when the fort broke apart and I know the royal family is dead, but I'm still okay." He pauses for several long moments before continuing quietly. "I guess that means I never really was a real nation, huh?"

"What?"

"Everything that made me is gone but I'm still okay. So that means I was never really made of them to start with." He scrubs a hand over his cheeks. "I never was able to get a real government or anything so I never got to be a real country."

"Hey," Denmark drops a hand on his back. "Having a big government and a lot of land doesn't mean squat. Being what we are is about the people we take care of."

"But all of my people are dead."

"No they aren't." Denmark sighs heavily and wriggles backward until he can sit up a bit. "Your main family, yes, but not your whole family. If they were *all* gone, you'd be in a helluva lot worse shape."

"But Prince Roy and his family were my only people, and-"

"No they weren't. You've got a bigger population than you think, kiddo."

"What? I do?"

Denmark nods. "Sure. You've got a huge royal family. That tends to happen when you crown your nobility through the internet."

"But that's just-"

"A way of inducting people into your family. You've probably got more Lords and Ladies than you know what to do with, which means there's no way every one of them is dead."

"But what if they are?"

"They aren't."

"How can you know?"

"Trust me, I know."

"How?"

Denmark grins. "Because, dummy. *I'm* an official Lord of Sealand. And I'm sure as shit not dead."

Peter gapes at him. "What? You are?"

"Hell yeah I am. So are Norway and Iceland. And Sweden and Finland, of course."

"But you're already…why?"

"Hey, thirty euros for Lordship is pretty good. And I had a frame I needed to put something in." He cocks his head. "The title was on the wall of my house in the living room…didn't you ever notice it?"

"No, I never did…" he pauses. "So, if you all did that, does that mean you think I'm real?"

"'Course we do. Like I told you, land ain't got nothing to do with it. It's all about the effort you put forth and you've got that in spades."

"Then how come you guys never officially acknowledged me in front of everyone?"

He shrugs. "What we think differs from what our people think. Sweden was working on it, though. Finland too. I think they were getting pretty close."

"Go figure," Peter grumbles. "I finally get someone to believe in me and the stupid world has to end."

Denmark laughs and shifts back down. "Well, here, how about this." He clears his throat. "By the power vested in me by physical national status, the Kingdom of Denmark hereby recognizes the Principality of Sealand as an independent sovereign state." He awkwardly bends his arm and extends his hand for Peter to shake. "Welcome to the obnoxiously cliquey club of the United Nations, Mister Kirkland. Don't eat the egg salad in the cafeteria. It'll give you the runs."

Peter blinks at him and lamely shakes his hand. "Do…really?"

"If we manage to make it outta this, I'll put it down on paper for you." His grins. "There isn't really anybody to stop me this time. Berwald and everybody else'll sign it too." He cranes his neck up. "And," he whispers. "When we find Arthur, you can rub it in his big, bushy face."

Peter is completely silent for a long time before he throws his arms around Denmark's neck as best he can and dissolves into muffled peals of laughter.

He can't recall the last time he fell asleep so happy.

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Sleep only comes to them for several hours.

Peter is jolted awake by Denmark's hand clamping over his mouth. His first reaction is to struggle, but the atmosphere in the hot, cramped trunk stops him and he holds himself motionless, pressed against Denmark's chest still, and just listens to the tense silence. He can't hear anything. He turns his eyes down to look through the dim light at Denmark, questioning, and his eyes widen when Denmark holds a finger up to the front of his mouth and shakes his head, signaling him to keep quiet. Only after Sealand nods does he let go of him in favor of making a slow reach for the rifle beside him, pulling it up enough that the barrel faces the trunk lid and the stock stays pressed against the floor.

Peter swallows. He still can't hear anything.

He tugs on Denmark's sleeve and motions upward with his head, still confused. "What is it?" He mouths, silent.

Denmark only keeps his eyes locked with the trunk lid and holds a hand up to stop Peter from moving around, which he does, laying back down, tucked under one of Denmark's arms and lacing his fingers together over his mouth, just in case. One minute passes and then another. From somewhere outside the car, Peter can just make out the sound of something clicking up and down, a noise that reminds him vaguely of falling stones.

Beneath him, Denmark goes stiff and begins to curl his finger around the trigger guard.

Nothing ever comes.

They wait out another fifteen minutes or so before Denmark lowers the rifle and starts to sit up. He passes the gun to Peter and pats his

shoulder as he makes a grab for the trunk release.

"Stay in here until I say it's okay, all right?" He whispers. "Be ready to run and keep your head down."

He manages a jerky nod and flattens himself against the floor while Denmark pushes the trunk lid open in a deliberate, slow movement, cautiously peaking out through the sliver of sudden light before he opens it all the way and drops to the pavement. Peter listens to him walk a complete circle around the car and nearly gets lost in how fast his own breath is coming, the rifle clutched tight in his fists, tense and ready to bolt at the first loud noise or misplaced footstep. He swallows and resists the urge to lift his head. His back is damp with sweat from spending the night in the cramped trunk and his hands are trembling from the fear of the unknown, but he can't help the curiosity that grows in him when Denmark's heavy bootfalls stop and he chances a look outside.

Again, nothing.

Denmark is standing in front of the trunk, his face tight with an expression that Peter can't quite place.

"Come on," he says, snapping his mask back into place. "We gotta go. Right now."

He holds the rifle out for Denmark to take and starts to climb out. "What's wrong?" He steps down next to Denmark and takes his hand. "What's…?"

He trails off and looks down at the road beneath his feet. Tracked through the thick layer of dust over the pavement are dozens of footprints that he knows cannot possibly belong to either of them. He can see the faded tarmac in the bottom of each shape; they're fresh. They trail a ring around the melted BMW and congregate in a line just in front of where they currently stand, five complete sets that he can see. One set breaks away from the line and goes straight to the

back of the car and Peter's hand clamps around Denmark's when his wide eyes follow it to the bumper.

There is a large, thick "X" drawn against the hood in the ash.

"They knew we were there," he whispers quickly. He grips Denmark's arm. "They knew the whole time!"

Denmark nods stiffly. "We need to go." He turns around and pulls Sealand along beside him, his head turned to the side of the highway, searching. "Let's put some distance between us and the car and then we'll check the map and figure out what we're doing."

Peter has to hurry to keep up with his long strides. "They're knew we were in there," he sputters. "How come they didn't-"

"They're making game out of it." Denmark clenches his jaw and drags him to the very edge of the road, away from the dead vehicles and closer to the empty, bald ditch below them. "They're following us."

Sealand's eyes widen. "Y-you mean they're hunting us?"

"Yes."

He swears he can feel his heart collapse into his stomach at Denmark's blunt answer. He clings tightly to the older man's coat and keeps as close to him as he can without getting in the way of his legs, falling into a slow jog beside him when he veers off into the same wooded area that brought them to that side of the highway to begin with.

"What do we do?"

They slide down a narrow slope into a shallow ravine full of dead leaves near the other side. "We stay ahead of them. Keep moving." They start back for the thick of the woods when the road comes into sight, settling into a zagging pattern back and forth between each

side at a run through the trees. Denmark starts to say something as they round a corner, the ramps just in view, but whatever he has to say is immediately drowned out by an explosion of snapping wood and crackling leaves, the forest floor flying up around them as the ground opens up beneath their feet and sends them plummeting into the dirt at the bottom of a deep hole.

Peter shrieks and twists as he falls, landing hard on his left ankle and shrieking when blindingly hot pain races through his entire leg, pitching forward into the gritty soil just as Denmark lands on his back next to him, a faint choking noise forced through the mask when his breath is knocked out of him. Peter turns over, trembling, and squints through his goggles at the opening of the sinkhole above them, the rain of loose dirt and ash slowly settling around them. Denmark coughs and struggles to get his lungs working properly again.

Above them, a branch snaps.

Denmark shimmies quickly backwards, pushing with his feet, and sits up in front of Peter, the rifle positioned against his shoulder and pointed straight up as the crunching approaches them in slow, cautious steps, much slower than how fast Peter's heart is going.

"Listen to me," Denmark wheezes. "We got two shots. I'll use mine on them, but if there's more than one…"

Peter sobs and clings to the back of Denmark's coat. "Please," he whispers. "Please, please, please…"

Denmark twists around enough to give him a tight, rough hug. "I'm not going to let them touch you."

The crinkling of leaves stops and a shadow falls over the top of the hole.

Denmark whirls back and aims, the rifle clacking loudly against his shoulder, the pistol above them making a similar sound as the backlit

silhouette takes aim at them as well. For a moment, neither makes a move and Peter can hear nothing but Denmark's fast breaths.

"Who are you?" The stranger calls down at them. His voice is accented, but Peter can tell at once that it isn't German. He jerks the pistol forward when Denmark doesn't reply. "Answer me!"

"You first, asshole!" Denmark shouts.

The shadow above them recoils slightly and murmurs something incomprehensible. "Unbelievable…" he lowers the pistol and leans over the hole. "Hey! What's the difference between Germans and mosquitoes?"

Denmark nearly drops the rifle.

The stranger hunches forward. "Well? Y'know what the answer is or not?"

"Mosquitoes are only annoying during the summer…" Denmark stumbles to his feet and rips the mask down. "You've got to be shitting me. Jan, is that you?"

"Hang on, I'll get you out." He draws back out of sight again.

Denmark blinks rapdily. "I can't believe it," he laughs. He drops down onto one knee and faces Peter again, slinging the rifle over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"No," Peter whimpers, still holding his ankle. "I landed bad."

"You think you can stand up at all?"

He shakes his head.

Denmark clicks his tongue. "Okay, here, get on my shoulders," he turns around for Peter to climb on. "I'll lift you high enough for him to pull you out."

"Who's 'he'?" Peter manages the awkward shuffling that eventually gets him on Denmark's shoulders.

Denmark gets to his feet again, careful and slow, and braces his hands against the side of the hole for balance. "You never met Jan?"

"No. Is he like us?"

"Yeah, he is. One of my best friends, too." Denmark lifts his head when a fresh shower of dirt starts on them again when Jan returns to the edge of the hole. "Oi, he's hurt, so be careful with him, okay?"

Peter tightens his grip on Denmark's collar.

"It's okay," Denmark pats his hand. "He's a friend."

Jan reaches into the hole and hooks his hands under Peter's armpits, gently pulling him off of Denmark's shoulders and to the edge of the hole. He sits him down several steps away and rocks back on his haunches to look him over. Like when he first reunited with Denmark, Jan's whole head is wrapped in a dirty cloth, dark skiing goggles strapped to the outside and belaying not a single feature of his face.

"Y'all right?" He asks gruffly. His voice is deep, much like Sweden's, but softer than he had been expecting.

He only nods.

"Hey! I'm still in your stupid hole!" Denmark shouts and Jan laughs from beneath his layers.

He gets to his feet and again returns to the edge of the pit. "Yeah, yeah, hold on." He bends down and extends his hands, which Denmark takes, and helps to pull him out as well, far less kind than he was to Peter, and drops the dirt streaked Dane on his belly a few paces away from Sealand. While Denmark dusts himself off, Jan tugs the sheet away, revealing a matted head of mousy brown hair

and an amused pair of olive eyes. He holds a hand out to help Denmark up. "I see The Calamity hasn't made you any smarter."

Denmark bears his teeth in a wide grin and grabs the other man's hand, hauling himself to his feet and yanking him forward into an overly enthusiastic hug. "Netherlands, you fuckin' asshole! Where've you been hiding?"

Netherlands returns the gesture with just as much vigor as his slighter counterpart and shoves him back, clapping his shoulder. "Been stuck here for a while." He turns back to peer at Peter. "You got a kid?"

"No, no, not mine," Denmark steps around Netherlands and crouches down in front of Peter. "This is Sealand. Peter Kirkland." He motions for Peter to sit back and begins to untie his boot.

"Arthur's?"

"Sort of." He gently slips Peter's boot off and cradles the boy's foot in his hand, rolling up his pant leg to inspect his swelling ankle. "Berwald's been taking care of him. He's kinda like my nephew." He pauses and sighs. "Way to go, dipshit, your dumb hole sprained his ankle."

Sealand bites his lip. The nearly white skin of his ankle is already beginning to blossom with purple and yellow and a stiff, warm pain has settled in the top of his foot. "I'm okay," he says softly. "I-it doesn't really hurt."

Netherlands's eyebrows take a slight downward slant. "First off," he points at Peter. "Yes it does. Second," he drops his hand and turns, exasperated, back to Denmark. "It's your own fault for being stupid enough to not see something as obvious as a pitfall." He kneels down beside Denmark and peers at Peter's foot. "Don't grow up to be like this guy," he mutters and jerks his head in Denmark's direction. "He's an airhead."

"Hey!"

Netherlands smirks. "Lemme guess… you're taking care of him, right?"

"No…" Peter shoots a hopelessly confused look at Denmark, a silent plead for some sort of explanation which never really comes. They certainly don't behave like friends. "We're trying to find everybody else."

Denmark nods. "There's a rumor floating around the bunkers that there's a guy running boats out of Poland. I'm thinking it might be Felix."

"Where're y'going that y'need a boat?"

"Sweden."

"Figures." Netherlands sighs and stands back up. "C'mon, come with me. We'll get you patched up." He shoots a look at Denmark. "And you need a fucking haircut."

Denmark rolls his eyes and gently lifts Peter onto his back. "You're one to talk. This is the first I've ever seen you where I can't see your forehead. You look like a big, shaggy stoner. Way to look like the biggest stereotype ever."

They begin to walk. "Least my hair can cover my forehead," Netherlands hefts his bag over his shoulder and motions for them to follow him. "Yours is still so big, your hair can't handle it. It pokes right out. Nearly blinded me when the light hit it."

A brief pause.

Denmark scrubs the back of his hand over his eyes. "I missed you, man."

Netherlands smirks and nudges him. "Missed you too."

Peter remains confused for the rest of the walk.

After a short explanation of their previous hurry, they pick up their pace and make quick work of the several kilometers of shaded back roads that lead to a burnt out elementary school near the edge of town. Netherlands stays a few steps ahead of them the whole way, pistol at the ready, and checks each crossing thoroughly before waving them over, somehow even more anal retentive about their exposure than Denmark as they travel, a trait Peter isn't sure if he should be glad for or not when they stop for what seems like the hundredth time.

They don't speak much on the walk, though Denmark does keep trying. Each time, however, Netherlands always waves a dismissive hand at him and tells him to keep his voice down. It takes a few tries, but Denmark eventually gets the point and goes quiet, his smile still obvious despite the respirator mask.

"Hey," Sealand whispers when they stop again for Jan to check the clearing. "I thought you said he was your friend?"

Denmark tilts his head back enough to look at him. "He is. My best friend next to Norway and the others."

"So how come he's so mean to you?"

Denmark laughs softly. "He's not being mean. It's just male bonding or whatever. Kinda like how me and Berwald are always jerks to each other. It just means we like each other enough that we can joke around like that."

"Oh." A pause. "I'm glad we found him then."

Denmark nods earnestly. "Me too. Really, really glad." He turns back around and shifts Peter up a little higher on his back. "I haven't been this happy since I found you." He straightens up when Netherlands waves them over and jogs over to meet him.

The rest of the trip is spent in silence.

When they reach the schoolyard, Netherlands hauls a large piece of a broken fence away from a patch of dirt near the dilapidated remains of an old swing set and brushes the ash away from the heavy, metal crank sticking out of the ground. He begins to twist it, the old handle creaking, and after a moment, lifts it to pull the lid of a shelter tunnel back.

"Found this by accident," he says. "Come on in."

Denmark nods and carefully passes Peter over to Netherlands while he steps onto the vertical ladder and takes the first few rungs. Once there is enough space, Jan lowers Peter in as well, allowing him to grip the rails and slowly make his way down on one foot, Denmark keeping a hand on his hip and guiding him as they go, reassuring him the entire time. The narrow tunnel goes completely black when Netherlands joins them on the ladder and shuts the lid, but the natural light is soon replaced by the beam of a flashlight and Denmark has no trouble getting them to the bottom. When he's gotten his feet back under him, he pulls Peter back into his arms and carries him to the edge of an unmade, inflatable mattress and sits him down, placing their rifle and pack beside the bed and again removing Peter's boot.

"You lucky bastard, how did you find a shelter?" He asks when Netherlands drops to the floor and clicks on a battery powered lamp. The space isn't nearly as vast as the community bunkers, but there is ample space for the three of them and their belongings. The walls are lined with bits of charred newspaper, barely readable in the low light, and several heavy shovels are mounted above the bed along with a metal first-aid box.

"Like I said; found it by accident. Tripped over the handle on my way to check out the schoolhouse." He drops his bag by a tall stack of wooden shelves and begins to rummage through boxes. "It's a smaller one, but there's plenty of food and water to last me a while."

He pulls a rack free and shakes the dust from a white towel. "I've been here for about a year, I think."

He hands the towel to Denmark and clicks open the first-aid kit on the wall, tossing a crack-and-shake cold pack to him. "Wrap it up in the towel and put it on his ankle. It'll help the swelling. How long has it been since you guys last ate?" He eyes Denmark and turns back to the shelves. "Never mind. Stupid question. I'll make you some soup. If you can manage that without throwing it all up, I'll get you something a little more solid."

Denmark folds the towel around the cool pack and gently drapes it over Peter's ankle, placing a reassuring hand on his arm when he grimaces. "Better?"

Peter shakes his head. "Not really."

Netherlands sits down next to him and hands him a tin cup full to the brim with water. "Don't make him think it's an instant fix, y'idiot," he hands a cup to Denmark as well. "Here," he turns back to Peter. "Drink up. Guarantee it's better than anything you've had lately."

Peter takes the cup and brings it to his lips. "Thank you," he takes a careful sip and his eyebrows fly up into his hair. He jerks his head up to meet with Netherlands' amused gaze and holds the cup tightly. "This is…!"

"Clean." He glances at Denmark. "I got coffee too."

Denmark nearly chokes on his water. "Are you serious?"

"It's the shitty, instant kind, but yeah." He gets up and returns to the small kerosene burner on the card table in the corner of the room, removing the can of beef and vegetable soup from the plate and splitting it between two paper bowls. He hands one to each of them. "You can have some later. Eat first." He stares at Peter. "Especially you. Kids shouldn't be as small as you."

Denmark blows over the surface of the soup and takes a long, slow drink of the broth. "Holy shit," he breathes. "I had forgotten how good *hot* soup was."

"Eat as much as you want." Netherlands sits up. "I've gotta finish my rounds upstairs, so I should be back in about an hour. Help yourself to whatever." He nods at the mattress. "I've only got the one bed, but it's big enough to share, so if y'get tired, feel free to lie down."

"You're going out again?" Peter peers at him curiously over the rim of his bowl. "Isn't that dangerous though?"

"Hn?"

"There were people tracking us," he explains. "That's why we were running when we fell in the hole."

"I'll be fine. The people who were watching you were probably just the people in town." He begins to wrap his head up again. "I can handle them."

"Are you sure?" Denmark sets the now empty bowl down and starts to stand. "Maybe I should come with you."

Peter's hand flies out before he realizes what he is doing and grips the back of Denmark's coat tightly. "Please don't go outside," he whispers. "What if they're still out there?"

Denmark exchanges a conflicted look with Netherlands, who simply nods. "Stay with the kid," he says. "M'not goin' far. Get cleaned up while I'm gone. There's some recycled water and bars of soap on the bottom shelf. A razor and scissors too." He pulls his goggles on and clips a flashlight to his belt, moving to climb the ladder again. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Be careful!" Denmark calls after him. Above them, the handle to the bunker door groans and light briefly filters down before the heavy

clang of it being shut again drops them back into the yellow light of the lamp.

They take Netherlands' advice while he is gone. Denmark pours water into a pie tin and sets it on the stove until it is good and warm and begins to gently wash the grime off of Peter's face with the corner of a soft towel, working the soap into his hair and rinsing him off after stripping him down to only his pants and undershirt. While it is still wet, he cuts the boy's hair back down to where it used to be, out of his eyes, and wraps the towel around his head once he's finished. Their clothes are still filthy, but without the months of ash and dirt on his skin, Peter feels lighter, lifted away by the soft scent of soap and water.

He leans back and watches Denmark curiously as he washes his own face and spreads a lather of soap over the lower half of his face, shaving away the stubble on his neck and chin. He glances back at Peter, half finished, and smiles at him.

"Wanna learn how to shave?" He asks.

Peter nods and scoots forward to the edge of the bed. "Sweden never showed me how."

Denmark pulls the towel off of his head and drapes it around Peter's shoulders, tilting his neck back and wetting his chin. "Well, it just so happens that I'm the one who taught him how to do it, so you're learning from the master." He rubs the soap between his hands and pats the resulting lather against Peter's chin. He holds the razor out for him to take. "Did you ever watch him do it?"

"Not really." He takes it and cranes up to look into the cracked mirror Denmark has set up on the table. "I used to watch Arthur shave between his eyebrows sometimes, but that's not really the same."

Denmark laughs. "No, it's not. Okay, here's what you do…"

They spend the rest of the time in front of the mirror, Denmark trying to demonstrate the finer points of shaving to Peter. It takes him a few small nicks before he gets it and by the time Netherlands returns, his chin feels itchy from dried soap and he's fairly sure he has razor burn. Nonetheless, when Denmark tucks him into bed after wrapping his ankle in an elastic bandage, he feels that he's managed to shave his way through some sort of right of passage, and he is absolutely certain that the bloody bits of tissue stuck to his jaw are a badge of manhood. While he lies under the covers, the poor nights sleep from before finally catching him, he watches Netherlands give Denmark a haircut, the two of them talking quietly in the dim light of recent happenings, Denmark inquiring about fellow countries and Netherlands answering him with too much honesty than Peter can bear.

He can't help but notice that Denmark never lets go of the hem of Netherlands shirt while they talk, and when they eventually both join Peter in the bed after turning the lamp off, he feigns sleep and just listens to them speak to each other. Denmark situates himself in the middle and faces Netherlands, tucked against his chest with the taller man's arms around his waist, and tells him softly of how terrified he had been that he might have been dead. Netherlands listens to him, patient and silent, and when he's finished babbling his way through previous worries, he reaches a hand to brush Denmark's freshly clipped hair back and kisses his forehead. Sealand can't quite make out what he replies with, but he can feel Netherlands' hand moving up and down Denmark's back through the covers in long, reassuring strokes. It's sweet, Peter realizes, the way they regard each other when the lights are out. It reminds him a little of Berward and Tino and it makes his stomach flip to think about.

After a short time, their murmuring stops and Denmark turns over to drop an arm around Peter, pulling him close and sighing in a way only a truly tired man can. Netherlands still has Denmark by the waist, but if his heavy breathing is any indication, he is already fast asleep. Peter remains still, but turns his head to glance at Denmark.

"Denmark?" He whispers.

"Hm?"

"We aren't gonna stay here, are we?"

Denmark blinks blearily and Peter is met with his blank eye. "Wassat?"

"Well… I mean, we're still gonna look for everybody, right?" He looks down. "We aren't going to stop just because we found Netherlands?"

Denmark closes his eyes again and smiles. "'Course not. Still got too much ground to cover." He yawns and resettles himself closer to Jan. "M'gonna see if he'll come with us tomorrow."

Peter nods. "Okay." He pauses. "Denmark?"

"Mm?"

"I'm really glad you found your friend."

Denmark cracks an eye open again and grins, ruffling Peter's still damp hair. "Well thanks, kiddo. I'm glad too."

He lets his hand fall back to the mattress and Peter turns over, breathing deep and letting his eyes drift shut. He is glad. He really is. He isn't particularly fond of Netherlands and his gruff attitude, but he is grateful to him for his shelter and easy comfort. The water is nice, the food is nice, the soap is nice, but none of that is what brings on the feeling. He can do without being clean and he has gotten used to going without much food.

It just makes him happy to know that for once, Denmark is the one who has someone to tell him that everything is going to be okay.

A/N: sorry for the late update, guys. Life has been weird lately. Thank you so much to everyone who is following this story and has

left reviews; it really makes me happy to know that you're enjoying it! The pacing is going to sort of be all over the place for the next few chapters, so I hope I don't put you off too badly with it.

Also, regarding Netherlands. I've never written his character before, but I have intentionally written him as a little... off. It'll be explained later. Also, there isn't much fanon info on him as far as names go, but someone was RPing him under the name 'Jan' and I rather liked that. So, Jan it is!

See you again soon!

# of 20

Peter sleeps in.

He isn't quite sure if it is the thought of safety that keeps him so comfortably unconscious, or if it is in fact the simple state of perpetual darkness that the shelter is in, even when the electric lamp is on in the corner of the room. Or perhaps the silence that is actually *silence* rather than the muffled drift that he has been stuck in. He comes close to waking several times, but in each instance, he is only aware of the old blankets and the soft mattress and it reminds him too much of home to finish the task of rejoining Denmark and Netherlands in the real world and he only rolls over and sinks back into the covers.

Eventually, though, he can no longer keep his brain switched off and he sits up against the wall, the blankets pooling around his waist, and yawns quietly into his hands, his eyes sore against the dim illumination from the light on the card table as he rubs the sleep from them and finds Denmark faced away from him on the other side of the room. He has one hand in his hair, elbow propped against the edge of the table, and the other stretched out in front of him, hand opened loosely and holding Norway's hair pin between two gentle fingers, his lips just barely moving in some silent monologue that Peter can't hear from his position on the bed. He watches him, not yet making himself known. His eyes are open only halfway and reflect the dull glow of the lamp as he stares at the pin in his hand, slowly turning it between his fingers and smoothing the pad of his thumb over the length of the cross. He stops whispering to himself long enough to cough into the crook of his elbow, but he doesn't resume the one sided conversation when it passes, settling instead to just stare at the pin.

He looks lost.

Peter clears his throat and it instantly snaps Denmark out of his own head, a smile coming at once to his newly brightened expression. He turns on the chair and starts to put the pin back in his pocket, but Peter stops him by holding a hand out.

"Can I see it?" He asks.

Denmark blinks but complies and hands it to him, placing it in his palm with more care than Peter is sure he has ever seen him give to anything as long as he has known him. He picks the pin up and holds it cupped in both hands. It feels heavy, but not with any kind of physical weight.

"You really miss him, huh?"

Denmark sighs and runs a hand down his face, palm covering his mouth when he tilts over to rest his elbow against the corner of the table. He exhales through his nose and nods.

Peter bites his lip and looks down at the small piece of jewelry. "Were… were you talking to him?"

Denmark closes his eyes and laughs from somewhere deep in his chest, sighing again. "Seems silly, doesn't it?"

"No." He pauses. "I mean, if it makes you feel better, it's not really that weird, right?"

"Maybe." He cracks open his good eye and smirks. "Or I'm just losing my mind."

"Or that." He reaches over the bed and hands the pin back to Denmark. After sitting back, he pulls the covers back over his legs and peers over his knees at Denmark. He has that lost look on his face again. "I'm sure he misses you too."

Denmark turns the pin over in his palm one last time before slipping it into his pocket and zipping it closed. "Nah," he laughs, sounding

genuine for once. "He's probably too busy looking after everybody else to miss me. He's probably holed everybody up in the mountains or something and scolding Sweden for not getting enough firewood or nagging Finland to stop playing with his guns long enough to help look for food. No time to worry."

Peter grins. Fantasy or not, it's a nice thought. "What about Iceland?"

Denmark's smile falters. "Hm."

"What's the matter?"

Denmark licks his lips. "Iceland is honestly the only one I'm really worried about. He's kinda isolated from the rest of us, so unless he was with Norway when it happened or he got picked up by a boat…" He trails off and Peter immediately feels terrible for even bringing it up.

"W-well, even if he's not with them, I'm sure he could take care of himself." He nods sternly. "I'll bet he's fine."

Denmark manages a half smile. "Yeah." He rakes a hand through his hair and sighs. "I guess I'm just extra worried about him because I've always been a little over protective or something."

"Of Iceland?"

"Yeah. Iceland is to me and Norway what you are to Sweden and Finland. I mean, he's not really like our kid or anything, but it kinda felt like it sometimes." He leans back in his seat and lets his shoulders sag, making him look impossibly thin in the dim light. "But I still helped raise him and watched him grow up, so I guess it's only natural. Plus, he's always been kind of a sick kid, but then again, he isn't exactly a stranger to giant clouds of ash, so… I don't know." He scrubs his palms down his face and sits up suddenly. "Anyway, let's talk about something else. Are you hungry?"

Sealand blinks, a bit startled at the rapid change in subject. "Um, yes."

"I'll make you something." The chair scrapes against the floor when he pushes it back and he goes over to the shelves, rummaging through bins. "How's your ankle?"

"It's okay." Peter wiggles out of covers enough to rearrange them over his head and shoulders, crossing his legs and watching Denmark pull two white packets out of a box. "Where's Netherlands?"

"Out scavenging. I thought about going with him, but I didn't want you to wake up by yourself." He grins and tears open one of the packages with his teeth. "You slept for a long time. You must have been tired."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Peter deadpans and rolls his eyes. "It's a lot more comfortable than a car trunk."

Denmark empties the packet into a shallow tin, a rain of small, nearly translucent white flakes cascading into the pan with a noiseless sigh. He tips half a bottle of water into the tin and sets it on the hot plate. "Trust me, I know," he laughs and comes to sit next to him. He hands him a cup of water. "I almost wish we could stay here."

Peter grips the cup. "But you said we wouldn't. You said we were going to keep looking for everyone."

Denmark quirks a brow and stares at him from over his own drink. "I said I *almost* wish, kiddo." He reaches out and musses his hair from over the blanket. "We'll stay here until your ankle is better and then keep going."

"Is Jan going to come with us?"

"I dunno yet. He said he'd think about it."

Peter takes a slow sip of his water. "He didn't say yes?"

Denmark shrugs. "Would you want to leave if you had all this?"

"I guess not, but…" he frowns. "Doesn't he want to find his family?"

Denmark clicks his tongue and sets his cup down on the floor. "I don't think he has any family left to find, Peter. Belgium is the only one he considers family and he said she died during the second flash."

"Oh."

"Don't bring her up around him, all right? I think he's still dealing with it."

"Okay."

Denmark picks up his cup again and holds it out to Peter. "You want to try some coffee?"

Peter wrinkles his nose. "No way. Coffee's gross."

"Are you sure?" He wiggles the cup. "It's pretty good for instant stuff."

"You probably put too much sugar in it."

"I only drink black coffee."

"Liar."

"Am not. Besides, there isn't any to have."

"I bet you'd put cream and sugar in it if you could."

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"Because you drink like a girl."

Denmark sputters on his coffee. "What?"

"I dunno." He grins. "That's what Jan told me this morning before you woke up."

Denmark scowls and shoves his cup down on the floor, getting to his feet and stalking over to the table. " *Well,* he's full of it." He leans over the stove and stirs the contents of the pan. "If anyone here drinks like a girl, it's him. He's just spreading vicious rumors because I told everyone about the time he fell out of the boat a few years ago when he came to visit me."

"He told me about that too. He said he only fell out because he was laughing too hard at you after you barfed into the cooler."

Denmark straightens up. "That never happened!" He plods back to Peter and sets the tin down in front of him, shoving a spoon into his hands. "Now eat!"

Peter grins and takes it from him. "Whatever you say, madam." While Denmark continues to splutter indignantly, he pokes at the creamy, white concoction in the pan, stirring it curiously. "What is this?"

"Instant mashed potatoes," Denmark huffs. He picks up his cup again and polishes off the coffee. "I'm going to kill him when he gets back."

Peter just laughs and eats his breakfast.

While they wait for Netherlands to return, they bide their time by playing games in Peter's sketchbook. After fishing a pencil out of one of the many boxes on the wall, Denmark leans back in the bed with Peter in his lap and they play round after round of tic-tac-toe and hangman, Peter accusing him of cheating whenever he uses a Danish word on his turns. Eventually, the game just dissolves into Denmark teaching him how to swear in Danish which results in Peter

getting very frustrated when his tongue can't manage the words even after Denmark writes them out and illustrates how to say them. After his tenth attempt at 'kælling', he snaps his notebook shut and tosses it on the floor.

"Your language is stupid!" He grouses. "That doesn't even make sense!"

"It's not stupid!" Denmark pouts as he wipes their dishes clean and stores them away. "It's just… exclusive." He starts to further his defense, but the hatch above them creaks and they are joined by Netherlands a moment later.

He still has his head wrapped up when he slides down the ladder to meet them and his coat is streaked with lines of wet, black grease, pooled in the folds of the fabric and soaking through the damp garment. He unwinds the cloth and tosses it over the back of the chair, shaking out his hair and grimacing.

"S'raining," he says simply. "I don't recommend going outside."

Denmark whistles and tosses him a towel. "It's been a while since it's last rained. How bad is it?"

Netherlands catches it and immediately begins to scrub his face clean of any lingering rainfall. "Any plant life that might've been coming back isn't anymore. S'not as caustic as it used to be, though. It's not eating through cars, anyway." When he pulls the towel away, the old fabric is stained nearly black. He wads it up and tosses it into a bucket full of recycled water. "How y'feeling, kid?" He nods at Peter as he passes him to fall bonelessly into the chair by the table. "Ankle any better?"

"It's okay." He sits up a bit. "What's wrong with the rain?"

"You haven't been in it yet?"

"No."

"Hm." Netherlands clamps a chewed up plastic straw between his teeth and begins to unlace his boots. "Rain's no good. It'll burn you if y'get caught in it for too long. S'because of all the chemicals that went into the air when things lit up. Pretty toxic stuff." He kicks off his shoes and slides down in his seat, sighing and rolling the straw to the other side of his mouth. "Could be worse, I guess."

Denmark grins. "Are you seriously doing that?" He sets the plate of left over potatoes down in front of Netherlands and sits down beside Peter, drawing the blankets up over his legs.

Netherlands glares at him. "Shut up."

Denmark leans over. "And he calls *me* a lady," he whispers in Peter's ear, loud enough for Jan to hear.

"What did I just say?" Netherlands spits out the straw and starts into his potatoes, muttering something about Denmark being an effeminate crybaby under his breath.

Peter stares at Denmark, confused. "I don't get it."

"He wants a cigarette. But there aren't any, so he's gotta chew on something to keep his mouth occupied." He smirks. "Too bad he can't just quit cold turkey like a *real* man."

Jan shoots him a sharp look. "Keep talking. I've got something to occupy *your* mouth with if you do."

They both laugh at Peter's horrified expression.

Netherlands scrapes the last of the potatoes from the bottom of the pan and tosses it to the center of the table, sighing loudly and craning his neck, grimacing when it refuses to pop. "I wasn't able to find anything useful today. Rain cut it too short." He flops forward. "Resources around here are gettin' pretty thin."

Denmark coughs into his hand and nods. "Have you given anymore thought to coming with us?"

He shrugs. "Still thinkin' about it."

"Dude, just come with us. It'll be just like old times."

"Except for the whole people trying to kill us thing."

"Yeah, except that."

Netherlands exhales loudly and slumps against the table, looking seriously at Denmark. "What do you think you're going to find over there exactly?"

"Our friends, if everything goes according to plan."

"You do realize that whole area is flooded, right?"

"Not all of it."

"How do you know?"

"I just do."

He sighs again. "You're even stupider than before, y'know that?"

Denmark grins, eyebrows going down in a challenging stare. "Stupidity and optimism aren't the same thing, dick."

"When it comes to you, they are." He sits up and finishes his water, rocking to his feet and unbuttoning his damp shirt, peeling it away to the thin undershirt beneath. He throws it at Denmark, quirking an amused brow when he doesn't even try to dodge and it slaps across his face, startling him to the point of yelping.

"What the hell was that for?"

Netherlands crosses his arms. "How did you not catch that?" He waits a moment for Denmark to try and sputter his way through an explanation before he steps in front of the mattress and grabs Denmark's chin, turning his face up to look at him straight on. "Man, I thought I was seeing things before. You're fuckin' blind, aren't you?"

Denmark swats his hand away. " *No,* I'm not." He scowls at Netherlands' incredulous stare. "I mean, not all the way. Only a little bit."

Netherlands waves his hand up and down in front of the left side of Denmark's head. "Can y'see that?" He tries the other side. "How 'bout that?"

Denmark slaps at him. "Yes, I can. Knock it off."

Netherlands smirks and stands back up. "Too bad. If you would've said you were losin' your eyes, I might've agreed to come with you. Can't take care of a kid if you can't see, can you?" He shrugs. "But, you've apparently got a handle on things. You'll do fine without me."

Peter takes immediate notice of the crestfallen expression that drops over Denmark's face. "Wait," he sits up on his knees, careful of his ankle, and grabs the edge of Netherlands' shirt. "Please come with us. You were right before- he's an airhead. And he *is* going blind." He ignores Denmark's offended huff. "We need your help if we're going to make it to Poland, especially now with people trying to find us. We can look out for each other and then when we find everybody, you can stay with us too." He buries his pride and puts on his best sad-little-kid face. "Please come with us, Netherlands."

Netherlands folds his arms again and leans against the wall, regarding them both with a rather bored expression for several moments before nodding at Denmark. "S'that true? You're goin' blind?"

Denmark grits his teeth. "Yes."

Without looking away from him, he grabs the tin cup off of the table and tosses it across the room on Denmark's left. It clatters to the floor and settles several paces away from the mattress. "Can you see where that landed?"

"No."

"And can you fire that rifle of yours with any kind of accuracy whatsoever?"

"Probably not."

"Can you at least run fast?"

"Losing that ability too."

Jan sighs and pushes off the wall. "All right."

"All right?"

"All right."

Later, when Netherlands is getting ready for bed, Denmark gives Peter the hardest high-five he thinks he's ever had.

A/N: kælling is the Danish equivalent of "bitch".

Everyone who has reviewed, thank you so much! I really appreciate all of the kind words you've left! I'm very glad every one is enjoying the story so much. c:

They wind up staying in the bunker for several days while Peter's ankle mends. Each day is spent much like the last; Netherlands is always awake before either of them and leaves to the surface to go scavenging while Denmark stays behind with Peter and plays games with him. They tear several pages out of the sketchbook to make a shoddy deck of cards and Denmark teaches him how to play rummy and black jack, neither of which works very well given that they can see the imprint of the numbers through the paper. But they preserver and by the end of several days, Denmark begrudgingly admits that Peter has surpassed him in skill and offers to teach him more swears as a reward, a prize that Peter puts on hold, not wanting to trip over his own mouth again with Denmark's bizarre way of speaking.

"It's too hard," he tells him. "Teach me how to say something dirty in a language that actually makes sense."

He spends over an hour trying to flop through old Norse before he realizes that Denmark is toying with him and he throws a wadded up ball of paper at his head and demands to know what 'perkele' means. Denmark tells him it means 'I love Sweden' in Finnish and encourages him to use the word frequently whenever they reunite with the others.

Things remain mostly uneventful. Netherlands returns around the same time each day, empty handed every time, and gives them a run down of what he has seen for the day; a newly fallen tree here, prints in the ash there. He doesn't talk much when they are all together, but Peter catches him and Denmark talking quietly during odd hours of the night when they think he is asleep, trading information based on their travels and the horrors that they have encountered. By pretending to slumber, he learns that Switzerland has fallen into chaos and that the small surviving society there has completely dissolved into violence and human butchery, people stalking each other for resources and food, regardless of where it

comes from, and have begun a slow spread into Austria and southern Germany.

"Not far from where we started," Denmark tells Netherlands. "They're literally right behind us."

Sealand tries not to listen too deeply to their conversations. It scares him too much to really know, but curiosity has always been his weakness and, no matter how hard he tries, he always manages to keep one ear trained on them, catching terrible stories every night. Waterlogged bodies in Croatia. Cannibals in Hungary. Seemingly endless sink holes in Slovenia.

Complete silence in Belgium.

He tries to keep his head buried in the pillows on the third night after a particularly dark story about Denmark finding a bunker full of swollen bodies in Naples. It reminds him too much of the woman that cared for him when he first woke up. He doesn't want to know about the smell or how long it took Denmark to bury each of them; it's too gruesome, too real, and too much to think about. He turns over and starts to cover his ears, but a single word in their soft conversation immediately grabs his attention.

France.

"Ran into France a few months ago," Netherlands tells him over the edge of his cup. "They were on their way to a shelter in Leipzig."

The legs of Denmark's chair clack loudly against the floor when he lurches forward to catch his dropped coffee. "What? France? He's okay?"

Netherlands shrugs. "He's alive."

Denmark wipes the spilled drink off of the front of his coat. "How was he? Were you able to talk to him at all?"

"He doesn't have any arms anymore. He's got most of the left one, but the right one's gone at the shoulder." He sips his water. "He was with Germany and England. Buncha civilians too."

Denmark sags in relief. "Oh shit, that's such a relief. They're still okay?"

"Germany's doing all right. Still an OCD tight-ass, anyhow. England doesn't talk much on account of the heat from before, but that's pretty much expected."

"Heat? What do you mean?"

Netherlands raises a brow. "You know how if you ever fall into a fire, you're not supposed to gasp?"

"Yeah?"

"Same thing applies to the end of the world."

"Oh."

Jan sets his empty cup down and stretches. "Anyway, they wouldn't stay long. Too many sick people to dawdle. They had at least a dozen people with them."

"Ah. Were…" Denmark pauses and glances over at Peter who is still feigning sleep. "Were they looking for anyone by chance?"

"You mean the kid?"

"He has a name you know."

He rolls his eyes. "You mean *Peter* ?"

"Yeah."

Netherlands' stare flits over to Peter's prone form. "The only people they asked me about were Prussia and Spain."

"They didn't mention him at all?"

"No."

Their conversation continues late into the night, the two of them completely unaware of the conflicting tears on Peter's face.

On the morning of the fourth day, Denmark exudes an astounding burst of perceptiveness and notices how quiet Sealand has been all morning. He pauses from his task of repairing a tear in his jacket long enough to sit down in front of him, taking his hands and peering at him in concern, his mouth turned down in a scowl when Peter refuses to meet his gaze.

"What's the matter?" He asks him gently. "You've been weird all day. Does your ankle hurt?"

"No." He tries to pull his hands free of Denmark's, but the stubborn Dane keeps his fingers locked solid with his own. "I'm okay."

"No you aren't."

"Yes I am."

"No you aren't."

Peter glares at him. "You argue like a little kid."

"It's only fair when I'm arguing with a little kid."

"I'm not a little kid!"

Denmark sighs and glowers at him. "Then stop pouting like a little kid and tell me what's wrong. I can't make you feel better if I don't know what's bothering you."

Peter bites his lip. "I don't need anyone to make me feel better."

"Peter…"

"I heard you and Netherlands talking about England and France last night," he blurts. He digs his fingers into Denmark's hands and looks at the floor, his face heated an emotion that is too sad to be anger and too lasting to be embarrassment. "I just thought…" he can feel the heat rising to his eyes. "Arthur's not even looking for me."

Denmark's expression softens when Peter trails off into indignant sniffling and reaches a hand out to rub the back of his head, settling on the back of his neck and pulling him into a hug at the first sign of tears. He doesn't say anything; he just pulls him into his lap and wraps him up, patient and quiet while Sealand cries into his shoulder, small hands fisted into the front of his shirt as he trembles his way through the fit he has been fighting all morning. He's vaguely aware of Denmark's rough hands stroking his hair, but it is hardly a comfort when it only reminds him of how much smaller England's hands were and how he never did anything like this when Peter was upset. He never used to hate England- he just resented him for never acknowledging him. He never complained about the lack of familial connections because he never *wanted* Arthur to be any sort of caretaker, even in the fatherly sense. He didn't mind that Arthur was never really there because he at least knew that, in his own way, he still cared enough to occasionally write him a letter or present him with a birthday gift or stop by for a visit between meetings.

But this is different.

"He doesn't even care…" he sobs. "I could be dead and he doesn't care."

Denmark presses his cheek to the top of his head and shushes him. "Peter, that's not true and you know it."

"T-then how come he isn't looking for me? He's looking for Spain and Prussia so how come-" He cuts himself off with an ill-timed cough and doesn't bother picking the sentence back up.

"I don't know what he's thinking," Denmark murmurs into his hair. "Someone might have told him they saw you dead or maybe he's just still too stubborn to admit that he's worried about you. But none of that means he doesn't care." He draws back enough to run his thumb over Peter's cheekbone, pushing the tracks of tears away. "The important thing is that he's okay and we know he's somewhere in Leipzig. Leipzig is on our way and we'll check every bunker we find as we go. And then you can ask him yourself." He catches Peter's chin and gently lifts his face to look at him. "And if he isn't happy to see you, I promise to personally drag him out into the ash so that you can beat the hell out of him." He stares at him seriously. "Okay?"

Peter sniffs and rubs the back of his hand over his eyes. He still doesn't trust himself to talk so he offers Denmark a shaky nod, which appeases the older man enough to smile. He claps his shoulder just hard enough to jostle him and sits him back onto the bed.

"Good. Now come on," he gets to his feet to retrieve their awkward deck of cards. "You can whoop my ass at blackjack again."

Netherlands returns much later than usual that night and bothers with no pleasantries when he arrives. He throws his coat onto the table, barely missing their game, and heads straight for the bed.

"We're leaving tomorrow," he tells them. His voice is flat and he doesn't even look at them. "Make sure you're packed and ready to go by dawn."

Denmark and Sealand exchange a confused glance and Denmark gets out of his seat to follow him to the mattress. "What's the rush?"

"People are getting closer. We need to get a move on." He yanks the covers up over his shoulders and turns over. "This is the last night you get a bed. Enjoy it."

He ends the conversation there by stuffing his head under the blankets and deflating with an exhausted sigh that leaves Denmark standing with a clueless expression on his face while Peter just blinks at them both. Denmark shrugs and picks up their backpack from under the card table.

"I guess we're leaving in the morning." He starts to place canned goods into the bag along with Peter's sketchbook and their map. "If your ankle isn't up to it, I can carry you."

"I think it's okay," Peter slides to the floor to illustrate his point and begins collecting his belongings as well. "Do you think he packed already?"

"Probably. He's always been the kinda guy who likes to be prepared."

Peter nods. "You know him pretty well, huh?"

"Oh yeah, he and I go way back." Denmark laughs and tosses Peter his newly hemmed jacket. "We've fought each other, we've fought together. We actually wrote to each other during the Second World War when neither of us was allowed to talk to our families. After all the bullshit, though, we mostly just hung out a lot." He grins. "He's the one guy I know who likes bicycles as much as I do."

"Norway said that you guys went camping a lot."

He nods. "We did. We used to take our bikes out into the woods a few times a month to just go relax."

"You mean get high, right?"

Denmark whirls on him, a thoroughly horrified look plastered to every inch of his face. "Who told you that?"

"No one. So, I'm right then?"

Denmark rolls his eyes. "All right, fine, yes, we *occasionally* may have shared a bag of recreational drugs." He points at him. "But that was rare. It was mostly just beer and cigarettes over a campfire. Drugs are bad, got it?"

Peter grins. "I don't think I could find any now even if I wanted to."

Denmark ponders that for a moment, seemingly satisfied with his answer, before turning his head to peer over at Netherlands, checking if he's still up by tossing a crumple of used paper at him. It bounces off of his shoulders and when it elicits no reaction, Denmark waves Peter in close.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Peter's eyebrows raise and he nods. "Okay."

Denmark glances back at Jan one more time and reaches into his pocket, pulling out a plastic film canister. "I found this about a week before I found you." He flips the cap off with his thumb and shakes the contents out into his hand. "I was saving it just in case I ever found him."

In his palm, half of an unfiltered cigarette sits in nearly pristine condition.

"I'm going to give it to him once we get out of here. Like a surprise."

Peter stares at him. "That's a weird present."

"Oh, be quiet." He carefully places the cigarette back into the canister. "A present is a present. I just want him to know that I'm happy he's coming with us."

"I think he knows." Peter watches him tuck the container back into his pocket. "You've kind of been all over him."

"Have not."

"Have too."

"Name on instance."

"Last night. You guys were snuggling."

Denmark's face turns an unflattering shade of red and he grabs Peter by the waist and tosses him into the bed.

"Go to sleep."

Morning comes too quickly.

Peter wakes to Netherlands' rough hands shaking his shoulders and tugging the covers off of him and Denmark both, muttering around his plastic straw at them to get up. Denmark manages a bleary confirmation of consciousness, but Jan doesn't buy it and hauls him upright by the collar of his shirt.

"Get your coats," he tells them. "We're going now."

Denmark staggers to his feet and yawns. "Hold your horses, man, shit." He scrubs a hand through his hair and nudges Peter over. "The mess up there will still be there in five minutes. C'mon kiddo, time to get up."

Peter groans into his arms, but complies and wobbles up as well. "What time is it?" He mumbles.

Netherlands doesn't turn around. "Just before dawn."

"How come we have to leave so early?"

"Because."

Denmark frowns and helps Peter into his coat. "You're acting weird."

"It's early. I want a smoke."

Denmark zips Peter up and grins. "Well, before we head out, I've got something for you."

He starts to reach into his pocket but Netherlands cuts him off. "Later." He finally turns around. "You ready yet?"

Denmark's smile falters. "Right. Later then." He coughs. "Yeah, we're ready." He eyes Jan's empty hands. "You aren't bringing anything?"

"No."

"Not even food?"

"Don't have a bag to bring it in."

"Man, we can make you a bag. You've got all these boxes-"

"Mathias." Netherlands shoots him a hard stare. "I'm not bringing anything."

Peter pauses in lacing up his boots just in time to catch the tense silence that hangs between them before Jan turns back to the ladder and spits out the split remains of the straw.

"Now hurry up."

Denmark shakes his head and picks up Peter's backpack. "It's full of cans, so I'll carry it for now," he says. He checks to make sure that Peter has his goggles around his neck and goes through their bag one last time, counting their belongings, and flashes him a thumbs up. "Ready. You got everything?"

Peter nods. "You aren't wearing the mask."

"I'll put it on once we get going."

"Okay."

They join Netherlands at the base of the ladder and he begins to climb it. "I'll go up first." He nods at Peter. "You go next so I can help you out after I say it's all right, got it?"

"Got it."

"Good." He begins the climb at a swift pace and soon disappears out of the hatch, calling down to him a moment later. "Okay, Peter, head up." He pauses. "Hey, I forgot the flashlight. Can you grab it?"

"Yeah, I got it," Denmark turns to retrieve it while Peter starts up the ladder. It takes him a moment to find it; it isn't in its usual place. He clips it to his belt loop and starts up to the surface as well. "Got it!" He calls up. He pauses halfway up the exit. "Anything else you forgot?"

Silence.

"Jan?"

He frowns.

"Peter?"

Nothing.

Something in him drops and he hauls himself up the ladder as fast as he can manage with the heavy pack of cans on his back and the rifle clattering against his side. Something isn't right. It's too quiet. He reaches the hatch and pulls himself through.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, something cold cuts through his blind spot and is jammed against the left side of his head.

"Don't move."

He freezes.

"Jan, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Stop talking."

Denmark turns his head just enough for the taller man to come into the sight of his good eye. He has one arm wrapped around Peter's neck, hand clamped hard around the boy's mouth, apparently oblivious to his terrified struggles, and his pistol pressed firmly against Denmark's temple. He forces him to take a step forward, dragging Sealand along, until they are standing in the center of the schoolyard beside an old merry-go-round, facing the woods.

"Hold still and don't say anything," he mutters. His voice belays no emotion. "If you try anything, I'll kill you both."

"Jan, what the *fuck* -"

The butt of the pistol whips across his face so hard that he spins in the other direction, barely able to catch himself before Netherlands' boot meets the small of his back and he falls face first into the ash. Peter shrieks from behind Jan's hand, but he is once again ignored in favor of kicking Denmark onto his back, the soles of his boots leaving ashy smears on the already dirty fabric of his chest. Netherlands whistles, so loud that it echoes in the drifting silence of the yard, and nudges Denmark onto his side with his foot.

"Get up. And don't talk."

Denmark only coughs. By the time he manages to get back on his feet, his cheek is already turning purple beneath a sluggish stream of red from his hairline and Peter is shaking hard enough that the only thing keeping him upright is Netherlands' elbow around his throat. Jan whistles again and this time, the sound is accompanied by shifting branches and footfalls. His face remains vacant as a small group of people emerge from the woods; humans, all of them, carrying thick chords of rope and all manner of sharp farming equipment.

One of the people, a stringy man with a cold face, steps forward in front of them all and claps. "I didn't think you'd do it."

"Shut up." Netherlands repositions the pistol back at Denmark's head. "Let me see her or I'm keeping them for myself."

The man grins. Even from his position several paces away, Peter can see that the few teeth he has left are yellow. Without looking away, he jerks his head and two other men appear out of the woods, dragging a struggling blonde dressed in tattered, tan fatigues with them, her hands and feet bound with the same heavy rope that many of the people carry, mouth forced shut with several strips of duct tape that go around her entire head. They lay her out on her stomach in front of them and she turns her mud-streaked face up to stare pleadingly at Jan.

Denmark's eyes widen.

"Belgium…?"

The pistol is again shoved against the back of his head. "Bel?" Netherlands calls out to her, a sliver of emotion finally working its way into his voice. He steps forward. "Bel, are you okay?"

"She's fine," the man answers for her. "Maybe a little worn out, but we didn't hurt her too bad." He grins again and it makes Peter sick. "Now let us have them."

Denmark's mouth falls open. "You unbelievable son of a bitch…" he chokes. "You're *trading* us?"

Netherlands shoves him forward. "I told you to stop talking." He grabs Peter by the back of his coat and pushes him into the arms of the man with the yellow teeth. At once, the man hauls him up by his hair and smiles right in his face, looking him up and down before passing him to another member of their party.

"He's the only one we really wanted alive. But we'll take the other one with us for later." Again, the sick grin. "Kill him," he nods at Denmark. "And you can have your sister back."

"That wasn't part of the deal."

"It is now."

Netherlands grits his teeth and grabs Denmark by the back of his neck and forces him to his knees, the muzzle of the pistol coming to rest on the crown of his head as soon as he's pitched forward.

"Denmark!" Peter screams. "Let him go! Denmark!"

Denmark rakes his hands through the dirt and chances a glance back at Jan. "Don't fucking do this. What are you doing?"

"I told you to shut up."

"No!" He cries. "What the fuck is this?"

He shoves him forward. "Stop talking, Den. Don't even try to tell me you wouldn't do the same if it was Norway or any of the rest of them."

"We could have helped you get her back. We could have-"

The gun cracks across his face again and he tips sideways into the ash. Peter struggles wildly in the hands of a stranger, screaming for him over and over again, and the whole band of humans begins to laugh amongst themselves as they watch Denmark struggle back to his knees.

"If you're really my friend, you'll let me do this." He grabs Denmark by the collar and pulls him upright again. "For her sake. Not mine."

Denmark spits blood into the dirt. "And what about his sake, huh?" He jerks his head at Peter. "What about *my* family?"

"He wouldn't have lasted out here anyway and you know it. Not with you taking care of him." His lips curl back. "Look at you. You can't see, can't run… can't even defend yourself. How the fuck are you going to take care of a little kid?"

"He's not a little kid."

Netherlands sneers. "Shut up."

Denmark finally manages to catch his breath and he digs his fingers into the ground. "So, what? That's it then? That's all? After everything, you're just going to sell us out to these fucking people?"

"Family comes first, Denmark. It always has."

Denmark spits again. "And you're such a fucking coward that you're going to shoot me from behind?" He twists his head back to glare at him. "Not even going to look me in the eye like a real fucking man?"

"Shut up."

"Coward."

"I said shut the fuck up, Den."

Denmark scoffs. He turns back to stare at Belgium, his eyes locking with hers. "Worthless fucker who can't even take care of his sister."

Netherlands boot comes up hard into his ribcage, knocking him clean off of the ground for a moment. He coughs, laughing, while he rolls over again.

"Don't worry, Peter," he calls when Peter screams for him again. "Everything is going to be just fine." He rolls over onto his knees and stares up at Netherlands. "This stupid fuck doesn't have the balls."

Netherlands pulls the hammer back.

Denmark doesn't give him the chance. He lunges forward into Jan's middle while he is still too furious to expect it and rams his fist into his jaw, flattening him to the ground and landing on top of him. The pistol flies from his hand and clatters into the space under the merry-go-round and Denmark is on his feet with his boot smashing into Netherlands' head before he can get his wits back, yanking the pistol

up and firing it straight into the bellies of the two men who descend on him, too close to possibly miss, leaving only the three in front of him. They fall at his feet and he discards the empty pistol, whirling around to face the others, the rifle swinging to his hands and coming up to his shoulder, aimed straight for the man holding Peter.

"Let him go!" He shouts. "You give him back to me and you all go fucking disappear!"

Peter shrieks at the gun facing him and begins his struggles anew, twisting and crying and trying so desperately to wrench himself free. Denmark has blood streaming down the side of his face and all Peter can hear is Finland's cheerful voice inside his head.

"He's a piss poor shot."

The man with the yellow teeth begins to laugh. "I don't think so." He reaches behind his back and frees his own small gun from its holster. "We know all about your little depth perception problem. You won't shoot. Too risky. You might hit the kid."

"I said let him go. *Now.* "

The man starts to lift his pistol. "I don't think-"

The rifle explodes and Peter is thrown violently forward, his face suddenly wet and hot when the man holding him jerks backward and collapses into the dirt. He doesn't have a chance to react. None of them do. Denmark takes advantage of the stunned silence and launches himself forward, grabbing Peter around the waist and hauling him up, tearing into the forest just as the man with the yellow teeth begins to scream obscenities and orders the one remaining man to follow them. Denmark doesn't turn around to see if he does.

Denmark drops him back to his feet as soon as they make it into the woods, but he is still too shell-shocked to make a clear connection between his legs and his brains and he stumbles, pulled along by Denmark's bolting strides, and it takes him more than one try before

instinct finally kicks in and he grabs on to Denmark's sleeve and begins to run as fast as he possibly can, neither of them even trying to hide the noise they make as they flee. Leaves and sticks break under their feet and branches slap across them in stinging little lashes as the forest gets deeper and deeper.

He can't see anything. His eyes are too thick with something he is too terrified to identify.

Denmark yanks him sideways and they both go tumbling to the bottom of a deep ravine, coming to a stop in front of the charred remains of an old tree. The roots are above ground, bent and twisted and leaving an opening into the hollowed out trunk above them. He shoves Peter inside and follows him immediately after, his back pressed against him and his hands gripping the rifle, faced to the roots, shielding Peter from anything that may be outside. His breath is rough; wet and tight in fast wheezes, and his shoulders are shaking hard enough that the gun in his hands trembles against the black bark beside them.

Peter isn't sure how long they had been running, but he knows they haven't made it far. They can still hear the two gunshots that go off in the distance; one after the other, barely a beat between the them, two loud cracks that get lost in the ashen sky.

Two shots.

Two bullets.

Netherlands and Belgium.

They hold as still and silent as they can manage for several minutes, just listening. Peter can feel something sodden and warm slipping down the back of his neck and he has to clap his hands over his mouth to keep himself from screaming all over again when his mind starts to give him an idea of what exactly it could be; something that certainly doesn't belong to him. Something that belongs to the man in the clearing. He tries to distract himself by curling his fists into the

back of Denmark's coat. Through the dim light, he can just barely make out his face. He's holding his breath but his chest keeps hitching, almost like a hiccup, and he has fresh blood dribbling out of his nose and between his clenched teeth, another episode brought on by too much hard running. He can hear it drip down the front of his jacket and onto the fraying straps of the backpack, tiny little *plip plip* sounds that should not be as apparent as they are in the stark, empty quiet that has cornered them in the woods.

No one ever comes.

Denmark pitches forward and vomits red into the dirt. He manages to aim away from Peter, but the twisted roots do little to hide the results as he holds himself bent at the waist on trembling arms and just coughs and coughs until he is only forcing wet heaves out of his chest, garbled sounds that mingle with the high pitched wheeze being strained through his teeth. Peter watches him. He watches him shake and gasp and cough up more and more, waiting for him to compose himself. He needs Denmark to compose himself because he has a stranger's blood and skin clinging to his back and he needs his help to get it off. He needs Denmark to compose himself because Denmark *always* composes himself.

It's only when each cough starts to come out with Jan's name that Peter realizes that Denmark is crying.

Somehow, that frightens him more than the bits of bone stuck to his coat.

A/N: "perkele" is actually sort of the Finnish equivalent to "fuck". I don't recommend using it to tell someone you love them.

WELL, I'm officially depressed. No new chapter of this tonight; I think I'm going to try and write some Ned/Den PWP instead. :|a

See you this weekend!

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Peter isn't quite sure what to do with himself when it dawns on him that Denmark is crying. A large, obvious part of him knows that he should be offering some kind of comfort, any at all, but he's still stone shocked from before with bits of skin and streaks of red all over his neck and face, and Denmark is still coughing up more and more blood into his palm between sobs and Peter just doesn't know how to handle it. He's scared. Terrified. Scared that the people might still be looking for them, scared that Belgium and Netherlands are dead, scared that he has the brains of a complete stranger all over his coat, scared that Denmark keeps repeating Netherlands' name over and over again like it's the only thing keeping him in one piece. He's scared by the steadily increasing pool of blood between the roots of the tree and the fact that they only have one bullet left and barely enough food to last a week if they're lucky. Everything has crashed into him at once; every fear and morbid thought he has had over the last several years slowly but surely becoming a reality.

And he is suddenly very, very aware of just how small he actually is.

He brings trembling hands up to his face and tries to wipe his cheek clean. His skin is sticky and hot from running and when both palms come away thick with red, he spends a long moment just staring, wide-eyed and hyperventilating, before he lurches forward and grabs Denmark around the waist, burying his face between his shaking shoulders and screaming into his back. It's selfish. He knows it's selfish. Denmark is torn between mourning and sickness and all Peter can do is cry for his own fear. He want to be mature and he wants to comfort him and he wants to be as brave as Denmark has been for him, but he has someone else's blood all over him and he *doesn't know what to do.*

Denmark looses his balance when Peter crashes into him and falls sideways onto his stomach in front of the tree. He tries to brace himself, tries to push back up, but his arms buckle and all he can

manage to do is lie still with his forehead pressed into the crook of his elbow, eyes pinched shut as he struggles to get his breath back.

"Peter," he wheezes. "It's okay."

Peter shakes his head and pulls off of him, his fists clenched into the front of his coat while he watches Denmark turn slowly onto his back. His lips and nose are stained red and wet and still running slowly in little diagonal lines down his cheeks into his ears. His chest is heaving and his pale face is streaked with tears, eyes barely open, and he makes absolutely not a single move to sit up.

"D-Denmark get up, I need your help." He grabs the sleeve of Denmark's coat and tries to haul him upright. "Please, I n-need to get it off…"

Denmark's hand comes up to rest on top of his own, but he says nothing. He's too winded still. He has an arm wrapped around his chest where Netherlands' boots came down, empty, wet breaths pulled in and out, in and out, and his eyes are too unfocused to possibly be able to see properly. He's blinking, so irregular and sluggish, and he's too shaken and thin and weak and leaking too much into the ash…

He's dying, Peter realizes suddenly.

He's been dying the whole time.

Peter grips his coat and tries again to tug him up. "Get up!" He cries. "P-please get up, please, I need your help!" He manages to shake Denmark several times but he's far too weak himself to pull him upright again. He pitches forward and presses himself to Denmark's hitching chest. "Please… please, please, please get up…"

He can feel Denmark swallow and bring a hand up to the back of his head. "I will," he murmurs. "Just… give me a minute, okay?"

Peter just curls his fingers into Denmark's lapels and cries into his neck.

He isn't sure how much time passes before Denmark finally plants both hands on the ground and pushes himself into a stiff sitting position. He sits still for a moment, just pulling in slow breaths before he carefully seats Peter against the truck of the tree and, keeping a hand on his shoulder, picks up their bag and rummages around until he finds an open bottle of water. He uncaps it with his teeth and tips it into his bandana, turning Peter's head to the side and gently pressing the wet cloth to his bloodstained cheek. He doesn't say a word while he works- just silently clears his skin, pausing every now and then to rinse the bandana, and picks pieces of bone and flesh from his hair until he is clean once again and only sniffling.

"Are you all right?" He asks him softly and runs his fingers across his head. "You're not hurt?"

Peter shakes his head. "N-no, I'm okay."

Denmark's hand falls back into his lap and he looks down, again blinking in a way that makes Peter think he might be falling asleep. "I'm sorry," he says after a moment. "I promised you that I wouldn't let anyone touch you, but…" he presses the heel of his palm against his forehead and releases a stuttering breath. "I'm sorry. I won't let something like that happen again. It's just you and me until we find the others and if we run into anyone else, I'm not letting you out of my sight. Even if it's someone we know. I won't trust them with you."

A pause.

"I wish Berwald was here," Peter sniffs when Denmark moves to take his hands into his own, cleaning each finger free of red. He can feel the way his fingers clench around the cloth and immediately feels bad when he looks up and finds Denmark's eyes swimming again.

"I know," he says. "I know. I'm sorry." He sits back and scrubs a hand down his face. "I'm sorry."

"W-wait, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay, Peter." He looks up and manages a bleary smile. "He always was better at this kind of thing than I was."

Peter bites his lip and reaches out to tentatively take the bloody bandana into his own hands, wringing it out into the dirt and wetting it again. Without a word, he shifts forward into Denmark's lap and begins to clean his face as well, the blood around his nose still warm when he dabs the cloth against it and begins the slow task of lifting it all away, as gentle and calm as he can manage with his heart racing as fast as it is. He's careful; Denmark feels like paper to him and he's terrified that if he rubs too hard, he might burn up beneath his fingers and drift away with the rest of the world. Like the trees and the cars and the homes.

Like Netherlands and Belgium.

Denmark closes his eyes while Peter works in silence and when he quietly announces that he's done, he falls forward, hands in his lap, and rests his face in the crook of Peter's neck. He doesn't say anything or move to touch him. He doesn't move at all; he only sits there. He scarcely feels like he's breathing at all, but Peter can feel his too fast breaths against his cheek and he brings his arms up to hug Denmark's head.

"It's okay…" he whispers. He can feel Denmark's spine pushing out through his coat and he buries his face in his shoulder to hold onto him a little tighter.

"It's okay."

Nightfall doesn't see them much further than the tree.

They begin walking again after Denmark composes himself and consults their map, proclaiming that they need to find the road again before they continue their journey because he has no idea where they've wound up. After finding north, they start out and he carries the pack on one arm while Peter attaches himself to the other, heading up the ravine and back to the thick of the forest, cautious and hyper alert as they move through the trees and rotten leaves in search of the highway. Peter is optimistic at first. The road wasn't far from Netherlands' bunker, so they can't be too far off. He supposes that they'll find another car to sleep in and, in the morning, retrace their steps back to a point on the map they can follow and set out for the next town.

But the going is too slow.

Denmark's strides are unsteady and he has to keep stopping to rest. Even with the mask, his breath is thin and he keeps a hand pressed to his side as they walk, eyes pained with every step, and Peter can practically hear his ribs creak from beneath his clothes. He never complains, though, and he apologizes each time they pause so that he can sit down and mop the sweat from his forehead, a rueful smile making the corners of his eyes crinkle when Peter grips his coat in worry and helps him take a sip of water. He tries to wave it off.

"Just a little worn out," he tells him when they stop for the second time in an hour. "It's been a hard day."

Peter doesn't believe him but he tells him that he does, not wanting to make things any more stressful than they already are.

By the time the sun starts setting, they are still in the middle of the woods without a clue where the road might be. Denmark has the flashlight from Netherlands' bunker and he instructs Peter to hold it while he constructs them a lean-to of branches and debris against the side of a huge, fallen tree, laying out their blankets and opening a can of tomato soup once he's sure the slanted little structure is secure enough to get them through the night. It's dangerous, Peter knows, to be sleeping out in the open like this, but they have few

options at this point and he eats his soup in silence across from Denmark while the last of the daylight disappears in the distance.

When Denmark passes him what's left of their dinner, his shoulders look heavy with an invisible weight.

"It was better when it was hot, huh?" He asks softly.

Peter doesn't know what to say.

He falls asleep earlier than Denmark does, his exhaustion somehow overcoming his fear of being found, and manages to disappear into his own head for several hours, tucked away against the tree and wrapped up in blankets that still smell like Jan's shelter. When he falls asleep, Denmark is still outside and when he wakes up again a few hours later, he is surprised to find himself alone still and again, worry begins to gnaw at his insides. He pulls the flashlight to his chest and crawls out of the lean-to, a blanket tied around his neck against the cool night air. Once he's outside, he flicks the switch on and the clearing just barely lights up under the dull, yellow lamp.

He doesn't have to look far to find Denmark.

He's sitting on the other side of the log, leaning against it with a distant expression held on his bruised face. He's looking up into the sky with his coat draped over his legs and his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, casual almost, and has the respirator pulled down around his neck.

He has the cigarette held loosely between his lips.

He turns off the flashlight. "Denmark?"

He turns his head just enough to acknowledge him. There's enough smoldering, red illumination from the cigarette tip for Peter to see the silent tracks on Denmark's face.

"Can't sleep?" His voice is just barely above a whisper.

Peter nods and goes to sit down next to him. He smells like sweat and burnt tobacco. "You weren't there when I woke up. I got worried." He pulls his knees up to his chest. "Are you okay?"

"M'fine."

An awkward silence drifts for a moment before Peter nervously looks over at him again. "Are you sure you should be smoking that?" He asks. "I mean, I know why you want to, but…"

Denmark shakes his head. "M'not really smoking it. Tried to, but it hurt too much." He pulls two fingers up to pull the small stub away from his lips, holding it like some kind of fragile treasure. "I'm just waiting for it to disappear. As tot as." He brings it back up. "All that bullshit."

Peter looks down at his feet. "That doesn't sound like Danish."

"It's not."

He swallows. "Dutch?"

"Mm."

"What does it mean?"

"Ashes to ashes."

"Oh…"

Another long stretch of silence where they just listen to each other breathe.

"I'm really sorry," Peter whispers.

Denmark doesn't move. "Yeah."

"He was just trying to help his sister…"

" He was an idiot. He panicked. We could have helped him."

Peter flinches at how hard Denmark's voice is. "I know, but…" he trails off. He's too exhausted to try and even make sense of the mess of thoughts in his head and settles for just shifting closer to Denmark and spreading the blanket out around them both, leaning over and resting his head against his shoulder, waiting for him to finish.

"I still consider him my best friend," Denmark says after a moment. "Does that make me a shitty person?"

Peter shakes his head. "No." He hugs Denmark's arm. "I don't think he was a bad person either."

"No…" Denmark crushes the last of the cigarette between his fingers. "He wasn't." He rubs his fingertips together and flicks the black residue off into the dirt, leaving them completely in the dark when he sighs and finally moves to sling his arm around Peter's shoulders, pulling him in and stroking his hair.

"Thanks, kiddo."

For a while, they stay outside and just sit in silence. Peter thinks at one point that Denmark might have fallen asleep, but his slow sigh is a dead give away and Peter insists soon after that they go back to bed and leads him back to their little shelter. It's an odd reversal of roles when he finds himself tucking Denmark in instead of the other way around. He pulls the blankets up around him, turning in the flaps to keep them in place, and reaches out with light hands to make sure that the mask is secured around his ears before he lies down beside him and settles against his chest, exhaling quietly and letting his eyes fall shut only after Denmark's arms go limp and his breaths are falling even.

It's a strange feeling when he realizes that *he's* holding *Denmark's* hand. For as long as they've been traveling together, it's always been Denmark who has held his hand whenever they walk or rest.

He isn't sure if it makes him proud of himself or even more afraid.

It takes them two more days to find the highway and another week of camping out in burnt out old buildings and dilapidated churchyards before they finally have to stop in a big city to scavenge for food. They've tried to be as sparse as possible with their rations and at first; they keep their meals down to one per day, but are unable to keep that routine for more than a day with the amount of walking and climbing necessary in their trek toward Poland. Twice a day becomes the unspoken rule and as their cans of cold soup and packets of freeze-dried vegetables steadily dwindle, Peter starts to notice that his cup is always just a little fuller than Denmark's whether it be food or water, another commodity that is dribbling away from them. He tries to confront Denmark on the subject, but he denies doing anything of the sort and they just continue on into the fog.

Their pace is at nearly a crawl. Denmark's limp had become worse in previous days and his ribs are still too sore to manage any sort of physical activity beyond shuffling down the edges of the highway and rolling their blankets out at night, even that occasionally being too difficult should they be making camp beneath anything. By the end of the week, he is faring a bit better, but Peter still jolts with worry each time he coughs or has to stop to rest his aching lungs.

They don't talk about it. They don't talk much at all. It's too much effort and Denmark keeps getting lost in his own mind.

Peter doesn't need to ask him to know what he's thinking about.

They're not far from Nuremberg when their pack finally runs empty and they begin a slow decent into the city, just after dawn when it's still dark enough to provide them with some cover when they slide down the broken ramps and shuffle into the outskirts of town, hands wound together with Peter watching Denmark's blind spot at every turn.

"In and out," Denmark tells him, quiet and hurried when they jog across an empty intersection, headed for a small grocery store at the end of the street. "We'll check in here first for what we can. If there isn't anything usable, we'll try the gas stations on our way out of the city." They pause just outside of the broken glass doors and Denmark covers Peter's eyes as they step inside, over the charred, skeletal remains that lie over the walkway. "Stay close." He whispers. "Let's make this quick."

As soon as they set foot in the store, a wholly putrid stench crashes headfirst into them and Peter claps his hands over his nose, his stomach lurching uncomfortably at the wave of nauseatingly sweet, acrid air. He knows at least some of it is coming from the rotten produce aisle, but the overwhelming part of it brings him straight back to his first weeks in Munich and he grips Denmark's elbow, trying not to gag when they pass unhinged swinging doors that lead back to the store room.

"W-what is that smell?"

Denmark shakes his head. "You don't want to know."

But he does know. And when they take the first few cautious steps into the stock room, his hypothesis is only confirmed by several bloated, stripped bodies laying wet in the center of the room, their sallow, sloughing skin only just visible in the low light from the broken windows. Peter's eyes widen and Denmark shoves him backward before he can really react.

"Here," he hands him the rifle. "Stay right here, okay?" He turns back to prop the door open with an overturned shelf and starts back inside. "I'm only going to be a second."

Peter swallows and nods, turning back to face the rest of the grocery store while Denmark hurries to root through sodden, water-logged boxes in the corners of the store room. There isn't much that he can see. All of the fresh food is far too rotten to even dream of eating and from the few aisles that he can see down, he doesn't expect that

they'll find much in terms of canned goods either unless Denmark manages to unearth something that was never unpacked before the Calamity. The store has long since been picked clean. Nonetheless, he drops down to his knees and starts to peer at the space beneath the shelves in front of his position by the door. He can remember going grocery shopping with Finland and, on several occasions, having to reach underneath the bins to retrieve items that Tino would accidentally drop, his hands too large to fit but Peter's being just right.

He clicks on the flashlight and swings it down the length of the floor. For the most part, all he can see are dust moats and bits of rock and concrete, but at the far end, the light reflects off of something and he curiously crawls forward to retrieve it, grimacing when his wrist drags across the waxy surface of the linoleum floor. It takes him a few moments of blind groping, but his fingers eventually close around something cold and made of glass, and he wriggles backwards until he has it freed from beneath the shelf. It's a brown bottle, still capped, and Peter reveals a white label with a turkey on it when he wipes the ash off with the back of his sleeve. He peers at it.

"Hass… Hasseröder…" he trips over the name several times before it actually dawns on him what he is holding.

He's found *treasure.*

He scrambles to his feet and runs back to the storeroom just as Denmark reappears with several dented cans and a two liter jug of water. He sighs and crouches down to pack them away in their backpack.

"There wasn't much in there," he lifts one of the cans up to show him. "No pull-tops either. We're gonna have to open it all with the screwdriver." He pauses and raises an eyebrow at Peter's excited expression. "What's up? Did you find something?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Close your eyes and hold out your hands."

Denmark smirks and straightens up. He closes his eyes and holds his hands out just enough for Peter to press the bottle into his grip, grinning and bouncing on the balls of his feet as he watches Denmark's fingers curl around the neck.

"This…" he doesn't open his eyes. "Had better not be a trick."

"It's not."

Denmark blinks and his face breaks out in a wide smile. "You've got to be fucking kidding me. You found *beer?* "

"It was under the shelf over there!" He points. "There wasn't any more but someone must have missed this one." He turns back to Denmark. "You like beer, right?"

Denmark turns the bottle over in his hand and laughs. "I love beer. If I could sustain myself only on beer, I would." He grins again. "I can't remember the last time I had Hasseröder. I can't believe you found this."

"You can have it." Peter beams. "It's a present!"

Denmark shakes his head and continues to stare at the beer. After a moment, he looks up and carefully tucks it away in their pack. "We'll save it," he says. "For when we find everybody else. Then we can all share it together." He reaches out to give Peter and affectionate punch to the shoulder. "Even you. You're what, in your seventies now? I think that's old enough to try a beer."

"I dunno if Berwald will let me."

"I think he'll make an exception in this case." He holds his hand out for Peter to take and they start down the rest of the aisles. "I found something for you too, actually."

"You did?"

"Mm-hmm. Most of what was left back there was just canned vegetables and more soup, but there was one can of fruit left." He looks down and smiles. "Pineapple. One of the big cans."

Peter's eyes widen. "Really?"

"Really. It's yours; we can have it whenever you want."

Peter waits, lost in thought, while Denmark stands on a stack of plastic milk crates to check the top shelf of the cereal aisle. "Maybe we should save it too," he says after a moment. "Norway likes sweet food, right?"

Denmark strains to reach for a faded box of granola. "More than he'll ever admit to anyone ever. Berwald too." He frowns when he gets the box and finds it empty.

Peter helps him down from the crates. "We should save it until we find them, then. I bet it would make them really happy."

"If that's what you want, then I'm down for that."

"It is. It'll be like a party."

They take one last sweep of the grocery store before heading back out into the city. Their findings are meager, only the cans and water from the storeroom and a ripped package of stale, grain cereal, but somehow, Peter feels a bit like they've struck gold, even as Denmark again covers his eyes and guides him around the body at the front doors. It's silly, he thinks, that something as rudimentary as a can of pineapple or a bottle of beer could make him feel so excited. But it's all he can think about as they start back toward the highway. He can imagine sitting around a fire in a little shack, all six of them, passing around the fruit and drink and bathing in the comfort that they've finally found each other.

Childish, he knows. Fantasy, even.

But as they walk down a sidewalk lined with black skeletons, it's still a nice thought.

Another five days of walking sees them to Frankfurt.

"Big city means there's a trading post somewhere," Denmark muses over breakfast, the map spread out in his lap while Peter packs away their bedding. "Do we have anything worth trading right now?"

Peter turns their bag upside down and picks through their things. "We have a sketchbook full of games that you cheated at, the magazine I found, our food and water, our blankets, the flashlight, a book of matches, a screwdriver, and anything we're wearing." He looks up. "So… not really."

Denmark sighs. "We might be able to pawn off a blanket for a can of beans or something." He wrinkles his nose and folds up the map. "Or cat food."

"Gross."

"Better than nothing."

"Still. Gross."

"I know, I know." Denmark pulls his mask down and coughs into his fist. "Hey, can you show me how to change the filter on this? It's getting kind of rough."

Peter unzips the front pocket of the backpack and draws out the bag of filters, scooting over next to Denmark to take the mask from him. "You just pop it out. Like this," he presses down on a small tab inside the nose and tips it over. After a brief shake, the disk shaped filter drops into his palm. It's completely black.

Denmark picks it up between two fingers. "So this is what we're breathing, eh?" He frowns down at Peter. "I really wish you would

wear this instead of that bandana."

Peter clicks a new filter into place. "You need it more than I do. Here." He holds it back out for him to take, refusing to uncross his arms until Denmark rolls his eyes and secures it back around his head. "It's getting worse, I can tell. So, I want you to wear it."

"Worrywart."

"Thickhead."

Peter straightens up and doesn't quite catch whatever insult Denmark has to offer him, his eyebrows turning down in concern. "Hey, do you see that?"

"See what?"

He points to the sky, above the trees. "Smoke."

Denmark turns to look, clicking his tongue when he sees the tall, sluggishly moving trail of smoke that curls above the spindly treetops. "Smoke isn't exactly something new, Peter."

Peter scowls at him. "It wasn't there when we woke up this morning, dummy."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. When we were eating, I was facing that way." He curls his hands in nervously. "Which means it went up in the last hour."

Denmark nods, slow and thoughtful, and starts to get back into his coat. "What are you thinking? People?"

"Maybe. It's not a lot of smoke. It could be from a campfire."

"Which means it's either a trap or someone is just really, really stupid."

Peter pulls the backpack on and waits for Denmark to sling the rifle over his shoulder, eyes locked with the smoke. "Should we go look?"

Denmark sighs. "No, we shouldn't, but…" he frowns. "Don't you think if someone were following us they would have jumped us while we were still sleeping a few hours ago?"

"I don't like it."

"Me neither." He takes Peter's hand. "We'll backtrack and get back to the highway from there. It'll take a while, but it's better safe than sorry. C'mon, we'll-"

"Wait…" Peter holds up his free hand. "Can you hear that?"

Denmark goes quiet at once and tilts his head to listen. At first, nothing seems obvious; there is only the consistent drifting of ash and their own breathing. But after a moment, Peter points into the woods and Denmark hears it too.

Whistling. Low, tuneless whistling. And it's close. Too close to run without being heard.

He grabs Peter by the shoulder and drags him back into the ravine they slept in. "Don't move," he whispers. He pulls the rifle to his side and slowly shifts onto his stomach just as the bushes above them rustle and the whistling becomes much more clear, footsteps falling into the clearing. Peter bites his lip. Already he is fearing a repeat of the showdown in the schoolyard, his whole body going hot despite the cold, damp leaves, and he has to ball his hands into tight fists to keep his arms from trembling. He can hear twigs snapping and dirt shifting and the whistle goes a little higher, reaching some wordless chorus if the sudden energy behind it is any indication. Almost at once, though, Denmark looks confused. He's heard the song before. It's upbeat, weird and out of place given the circumstances, and he can't quite place it. But he is absolutely certain he's heard it at least once or twice. Somewhere in the back of his head, he knows he

words. Words coming from a radio coming through the speakers of an old, Ford pick-up truck.

John Denver, he realizes. Country Roads.

What the fuck is a John Denver song doing in Frankfurt?

He glances down at Peter and places an index finger to his lips, motioning for him to keep quiet, and carefully begins to pull himself up to peer over the edge as the footsteps slow and the whistling picks up. Peter's eyes widen and he tries to pull Denmark back, but his hand is easily evaded and Denmark manages to just catch a glimpse back into the clearing. He drops back down immediately, a startled look plastered to his face, blinking in disbelief several times before he crawls back up for a second look, slowly getting to his feet, much to Peter's horror, exposing himself completely.

"…Alfred?"

The whistling stops and there is a long, empty pause before Denmark goes flying backwards into the ditch.

A/N: I hope my tiny Dutch up there wasn't a huge failure. My beta, who is Dutch, is actually on holiday at the moment, so I wasn't able to have anyone look it over. I'm pretttty sure it's correct, but I have literally zero knowledge of the Dutch language.

And there, we're getting some America. I've officially lost count of how many PMs I've gotten from people wanting to know when America or Canada would be showing up and, honestly, I never planned on them making appearances at all. But even the OP has expressed a want for them, so FINNNNNE. Warning you now though- I've only ever written America once, back in my first fanfic ever, and I've never written Canada before. I'll do my best, but part of the reason I wasn't going to write them in is simply because I don't know HOW to write them.

BUT THERE YOU GO.

Also, updates may be a little slow over the next few days. I've got some wicked bad writer's block.

Also x2, thank you all so much for the flood of comments on the last two chapters. It seemed like there wasn't a whole lot of interest for this story, so it makes me really happy to know that people are finally reading. You're all too kind! /o/

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Peter shrieks when Denmark lands on his back beside him. He can hear the breath whoosh straight out of him when Alfred tackles him and the leather clad American lands right on top of him, arms clamped around him and shaking him back and forth, kicking up leaves and ash around all three of them in the frantic motions. At first, he's dead certain that Alfred is trying to maul Denmark into submission, especially given the choked spluttering coming from Denmark, and he nearly launches himself into his midsection to knock him off. But after a moment of stunned staring, he realizes that America is laughing. Not even laughing; it's even less threatening than that. He's *giggling* . Giggling like this is the most hilarious thing he's ever seen and swinging Denmark around in the dirt in a crushing bear hug.

"Alfred…!" Denmark flails from below him and smacks at his back, squirming and twisting and trying to slip out of his arms. "You're crushing me, fuck, get off!" He cranes his neck to stare, helpless, at Peter. "Get him off me!"

Sealand manages to snap himself out of his astonishment and leaps to grab the back of Alfred's coat and haul him backwards, groaning with the effort, and stumbles back when America abruptly releases Denmark and spins around to grab him instead.

"Peter!" He hops to his feet and twirls him around, bouncing and laughing still. "You're okay! Oh my gosh, you're okay!"

Peter coughs and tries to push himself off of America's chest. "Hi, America," he wheezes. "Good to see you t-" the rest of the air in his lungs is promptly squeezed out by Alfred's cheek smushing against his own in some kind of cruel, corporal cuddle. "Getoffgetoffgetoff…!"

Another pair of arms circle around his waist and yank him backward and he finds himself, much to his relief, in the liberating, much less

constricting grasp of Denmark. Both of them are panting and trembling with exertion by this point and Denmark's stare is somewhere between exasperated and horrified when Alfred starts toward them again, smiling like a mad man with his arms spread wide open for a second round.

"Whoa, okay, stop, stop!" Denmark sets Peter down and holds a hand out in front of himself. "We got it, we got it!"

"You guys are okay!" Alfred stops in front of them, still bouncing and grinning, and just starts touching them; pawing and patting and prodding, making sure that they are really there. "Oh my God, you're totally fine!" He launches forward and sweeps Denmark up in another hug, one that lifts him clear off of his feet.

Denmark coughs and pounds on his back. "Yes, fine, now put me down!" He huffs and smoothes invisible wrinkles out of his coat when Alfred places him back on solid ground. "I see *you're* doing just fine."

"Yeah, I'm okay!" He crouches down and pinches Peter's cheeks. "Aah, I can't believe it! Look at you, you're like a tiny Arthur!" He squishes his face between his palms. "This is so awesome!"

Peter swats at him and manages to wiggle free. "I am not!"

America straightens back up and turns back to Denmark. "So, if he's here, that means we're in England, right? He's like, half English or something, so that's right, right?"

Denmark tilts his head and just stares at him. "Wait, what? You don't know where we are?"

"Huh? No, why? Don't you?" He snaps his fingers. "Ooh, okay, I get it, you don't know either. That's okay! We can figure it out together 'cause you're here now!"

Denmark opens and closes his mouth several times before he actually manages to make any sound come out. "No, I know exactly

where we are… I'm kind of wondering how you don't."

"Well, my map burned up when we landed and nobody here will talk to me. Well, okay, some of them do, but they all keep talking in like, weird English." He balls his hands up and shakes them excitedly. "So, I'm right, right? We're in England?"

Peter gapes at him. "No, you're about a thousand kilometers and some water off…"

"A thousand what?"

Denmark scrubs a hand down his face. "Uh… something like six-hundred miles. You seriously don't know where you are?"

"So, we're not in England?"

"No."

A crestfallen expression overtakes his face for a split second before again pinging right back up to the same ridiculous excitement from before. "Okay, well, six-hundred miles isn't that far!" He plants his hands on his hips. "So, where are we then?"

Peter and Denmark just stare at him.

"Germany," Denmark says finally. "We're in Germany. The people here speak German."

"Oh!" He grins. "That would explain the weird English, then!"

Denmark and Peter exchange concerned glances.

"Alfred," Denmark starts slowly. "What are you doing here?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"I mean, what are you doing here? How the hell did you get from the United States to Germany?"

"I flew!"

"You flew?"

"I flew!"

Denmark pinches the bridge of his nose. "Would you care to elaborate on that a little?"

America nods enthusiastically and grabs Denmark's elbow. "Yeah, I'll tell you all about it! C'mon, you can come back with me and I'll tell you everything."

Peter grabs their bag off of the ground and hurries after them. "Are… are you staying where all that smoke is coming from?" He asks. "From over there?"

America begins to lead them through the woods again, cheerfully weaving through the trees back the way he was headed before. "Yeah, that's us!"

Denmark blinks. "Us?"

"Yeah, Mattie and me!"

Peter nearly falls flat on his face when America unexpectedly drags them over a log. "Wait, you have Canada with you?"

"Of course I have Canada with me." He laughs loudly. "You don't think I'd just leave him, do you?"

Denmark shakes America's hand off of his arm and slows down to fall back in step with Peter, who is still struggling to keep up. "You do realize that lighting a fire is really, really stupid, right?"

Alfred looks back and pouts at him. "No it's not! It's how I find my way back."

"You can't just leave a trail of broken branches or something?"

America waves a dismissive hand. "Nah, too much effort. And besides, I have to have a fire going anyway to keep Mattie warm. He gets cold a lot."

"Aren't you scared of people using the smoke to find you, though?" Sealand asks. "Like an ambush?"

Alfred snorts. "Give me a little credit. We're well hidden. Even if people did track the smoke down, they'd just think it was coming from an empty fire pit." He pushes a cluster of branches aside and ducks under them. They fling back and smack Denmark square in the face when he releases them. "Our place is underground. The smoke just comes out through a chimney!"

Denmark staggers backward and furiously brushes bits of broken bark from his hair. "Right. I guess we'll see." He looks down at Peter and rolls his eyes. It's obvious he doesn't have much faith in anything Alfred is saying.

"Here we are!" America bustles through another thicket and the makeshift trail opens up into a small clearing. True to his word, there is nothing on the surface; a thin wisp of smoke twists out from an ashy hole in the ground, surrounded by wood that looks like it *might* have been on fire earlier in the day, and disappears into the treetops, but everything looks mostly untouched. If he didn't know better, Peter might assume that someone had made camp there but left hours ago.

"So, where is it?" Denmark looks around. "I don't buy for a second that someone built a bunker all the way out here."

"Oh, it's not a bunker," America hunches down and begins to scrape dirt away from a bare patch of flat earth. "We made it ourselves." After a moment of digging, a small, silver handle appears and Alfred grips it, grunting, and drags it up, opening up an entire door in a shower of dirt and ash. He drops his bag inside and hops in after it. "Come on in!"

Denmark stares at the open door. It's completely covered by a net of debris, disguising it quite well when closed, but he recognizes the shape at once.

"You buried a *plane?* "

America's head pops back up. "I told you I'd explain, didn't I? Now hurry up, you're letting all the hot air out."

Denmark and Peter exchange one last skeptical look before following him in.

Inside, the plane has been completely gutted. It's on it's side, pilot side up, and a thick, metal pipe runs through the very center, buried in the ground below and disappearing through the wall above.

"Don't touch it," Alfred tells them when they move further in, clicking on a lamp hanging from the ceiling as he shuts the door. "That's the chimney. It's really hot." To illustrate his point, he stuffs his hand into a dirty, checkered oven mitt and pulls a small door open, showing them the dull glow of a smoldering fire inside. "Made it myself," he says proudly. "It funnels the smoke out just fine so long as we don't overload it. Nice and toasty, huh?"

"Yeah…" Denmark shrugs out of his coat. "Where's Matthew?"

"Sleeping still," he nods his head to the nose of the plane, toward a pile of blankets where the seats once were. "Gotta let him get his rest. I'll wake him up in a little while so you can say hi." He tosses the mitt back to the floor and hangs his bag up on a peg nailed into the wall while Denmark and Sealand awkwardly seat themselves on one side of the chimney, across from Alfred, and wait for him to continue.

Denmark pulls the mask down to his neck. "So," he says. "How the hell did you manage this?"

"What, the plane?"

"Yeah. You seriously dug a hole big enough to bury it?"

Alfred laughs. "What? No way, don't be stupid!" He leans back and struggles out of his boots. "We punched out when the plane crashed. It kinda did most of the burying on it's own."

Peter blinks. "You crashed?"

"Of course he crashed," Denmark rolls his eyes. "Trying to fly a plane with this much ash in the air is crazy. There's a reason why everyone used to be totally grounded every time Iceland threw a fit."

"Well, you don't have to put it like that," Alfred huffs. He crosses his arms and glares at them both. "For your information, we almost made it. We just got a little… lost. We ran out of fuel before the engines choked on the ash, anyway."

"And it didn't just explode into a million pieces?"

"Um, duh?" America shoots him an exasperated sigh. "No, we were flying really low. There wasn't that far to fall and it didn't hit at too steep of an angle. The tail got pretty messed up, but everything else was mostly fine."

"Where did you even get a plane?" Peter scoots up onto his knees and peers at the line of rivets above them. "I thought there wasn't any gas left?"

"This one was from my personal collection. It was in my underground safe-house when the flash hit, so it was okay."

Denmark stares at him. "You have a safe-house big enough to fit a personal plane in?"

"Of course I do." He puffs out his chest. "I've gotta protect myself, right? I'm America, after all."

"So…" Denmark pauses. "If you have somewhere safe, why are you here? Shouldn't you be helping your people?"

"Well, we weren't really supposed to be here this long, but…" he sighs heavily. "Okay, why don't I just start from the beginning, okay?"

"Yeah, that's good."

"Okay. Basically, we only got hit once. Out of the three flashes, only the first one really got us and then we got some residual shockwaves from the second one. The flooding and earthquakes were really bad, but all things considered, we made it out pretty much in one piece. The coasts were kind of fucked, so everyone started moving into the center of the country as soon as things calmed down enough to travel again. The roads were in decent enough shape that people with big vehicles could drive still and so it was a pretty fast effort, I guess." He turns back and grabs a stack of yellowed paper. He tosses it to them.

"I found that just before I left. It's a family's journal of how they made it all the way from Ohio to Montana in just a few days. Pretty heart warming stuff. They picked up a lot of strangers." He sighs. "Anyway, everyone started setting up camps around Montana and Alberta and expanding out from there. Shit was pretty destroyed, but I guess we've always been resilient enough to make it work. Some people started building new shelters while other people worked on putting out fires and gathering food and yadda yadda."

"People weren't trying to fight each other?" Denmark thumbs through the journal. "They weren't trying to kill each other over supplies or anything?"

"Nope. For as bad as things were, we still had enough workable land to grow food and were able to filter water from wells. It was thinned out, sure, but there was still enough for everyone." He jerks his head back at Canada's sleeping form. "We pooled our resources. We don't have a border anymore. We're just the United American Continent now. South America got hit harder than we did, but we were still

taking in refugees even while we were getting ready to leave." He smiles. "It's kinda nice not having borders. Makes y'feel like one big, happy family, you know?"

Denmark just grimaces.

"It wasn't just us though. Russia sent boats down into the Gulf of Alaska and we were able to meet up about a year after the flashes."

"Russia's okay?"

"Yeah, he's doing okay." He points to his cheek. "Got a big nasty scar now, though. He kept getting mad 'cause I started calling him chainsaw face. He looks wicked scary but he brought a lot of help with him. His people were struggling because the only real livable parts of Russia left were too cold to really do any farming, so we worked out a deal. He'd run boats back and forth out of Alaska and bring supplies and then in return, his people could start relocating to Canada and the States."

Denmark hands him the journal. "You were able to handle that many new people?"

Alfred sighs. "It honestly wasn't that many. Russia got hit pretty hard. And we still had lost a lot of people too. Basically, though, we're establishing colonies and trying to get survivors over. We still have land that can be cultivated, so we figure it's the best chance a lot of people have. Russia has been working his way through Europe, but things have slowed down a lot since fuel is running so low." He brightens. "But, not to fear! Between the two of us, we have four nuclear subs, so we're still picking people up. It's just harder now because no one expects a submarine. The next pick-up is due to make rounds in the North Sea in…" he shifts over to check a calendar on the wall. "Two months. Its first stop is in England."

Denmark runs a hand through his hair, obviously trying to digest the deluge of information just presented to them. "Wait, so…" he looks up. "These colonies, they're safe?"

Alfred nods. "People genuinely want to rebuild, so they're helping each other." He smiles to himself. "Mattie and I are really proud of everyone. Our people always have been pioneers and this case is no exception. We're going to keep pulling people in until we run out of ways to do it."

Peter's heart soars. "If we could meet up with Russia, could we come with you?"

"Of course! We have special seats reserved just in case we find anyone like us."

"Who all have you found?"

"Well, Russia was able to get his whole family out in one piece, so we've got Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. We found Greece in Italy with Spain, so we've got him. Antonio, and Feli." He looks down. "Romano didn't make it out, though."

Denmark clears his throat. "I know. Anyone else?"

Alfred grins. "You guys!"

"Besides us."

He shakes his head. "Not yet. We're working on it though. We're hoping to scoop as many of you out as we can on the next run."

"That still doesn't explain how you wound up here."

"Ah, well, it sort of does." He leans back. "Things were running smooth enough, so Canada and I thought we could… I dunno." He laughs sheepishly and rubs the back of his neck. "We wanted to find England and France. You know, to make sure they were okay and to tell them about the subs. I was just going to go by myself, but he insisted on coming too, so, here we are."

"How come you didn't just go in the submarine?" Peter asks.

"That's two less seats for someone else," he shrugs. "Plus, we thought that if we could get to the center of the country, we'd have a better chance of actually finding them. But our navigations went screwy, we got lost, and we crashed before we could make it there. We've been here for about six months, I guess."

"And you haven't moved on?" Denmark frowns. "You haven't been trying to figure out where you are or where everyone might be?"

"Ah. Well." He clears his throat and glances back at Canada. "We want to, but…"

"But we can't." A soft, forth voice cuts him off and Peter nearly jumps out of his skin. There is a rustling of blankets when Canada rolls over onto his back. "Al, could you please bring me some water?"

America scrambles to his knees and hurries to bring a canteen to him, shifting close and slipping an arm under his shoulders to prop him up, lifting the water to his lips and helping him take small, slow sips. After a moment, he holds up a hand and Alfred sets the water down, but keeps Canada held loosely to his chest.

"I found friends!" He says cheerfully, smoothing a hand down Matthew's hair. "Isn't that great?"

"I can tell. Who is it?"

Denmark glances at Peter, worried. "Denmark," he says. "And Sealand."

"Peter?"

"Yes," Peter calls softly. "It's me."

"I'm so relieved you're okay. Al and I were just talking about you the other day."

"You were?"

A low laugh. "Of course. You're a bit like our half-brother, aren't you? We were worried that the ocean might have swept you away. You're all in one piece?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." He shifts forward and tries to peer around the chimney. "Are you all right?"

Alfred glances back at him. "He's fine. Just a little sick." He turns back to Matthew and smiles thinly, bringing a gentle hand down his cheek. "Right, Mattie? Only a little sick."

A sigh. "Right. Just a little."

Denmark scowls. "Wait, he's sick? How sick?"

Alfred turns back to snap at him, but Matthew speaks up before he can. "I can't see, I'm afraid. Or walk. So-" He goes rigid suddenly, breaking down into a fit of wracking coughs, hollow and damp and deep in his chest as he jerks against America. It lasts for several minutes, Denmark and Sealand watching with wide eyes, before he exhales slowly and settles back into Alfred's arms, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "So, pretty sick, I'd say."

"He's going to get better!" Alfred turns and glares at Denmark. "We just have to hold out until Russia gets here and then when we get home, we have medicine that can make him better."

Denmark's jaw sets and he starts to move forward. "Let me see," he murmurs. He sits down next to America and ignores the dirty look that is shot his way in favor of clicking on his flashlight to look down at Canada. Like the rest of them, he's lost a considerable amount of weight, but his face is unmarred and still fairly healthy looking.

Except that both of his eyes are a dull, milky white.

Denmark swallows and turns the lamp off. "How long has it been like this?"

"It was a gradual process. It started before we left," Canada sighs. "All in all, maybe eight months from point A to point B. Why do you ask?"

Denmark ignores the question and turns back to Alfred. "And you have a cure for it? Back at your colonies?"

"Well… not yet. But we will!" His eyes flit down and for once, he looks as helpless as the rest of them. "We have to."

A silence. Canada turns his head curiously and reaches a hand up to gently touch the side of Denmark's face. "You have it to, don't you?" He asks. He's quiet for a beat. "Or is it Peter?"

Denmark shakes his head and closes his eyes. "It's me."

Canada nods and fans his fingers out until the tips brush against Denmark's eyelids. "How bad is it?"

"I can still walk."

"Can you see?"

"Sort of."

"Still breathing?"

"Well enough."

"I see." He presses the pad of his thumb to Denmark's cheek. "And how long has it been for you?"

Denmark pauses, eyes opening again to glance back at Peter. "Six and a half months." He shrugs. "Give or take a few weeks."

He smiles and drops his hand back to his lap. "Modern lepers are we," he muses. "But you're still up and moving, so I suppose that's the best we can hope for."

Peter grips the front of his coat, watching the scene in front of him unfold with wide eyes. Denmark continues to speak to Canada, too quiet for Peter to hear, but he isn't sure he could hear them even if he wanted to over the roar of blood in his ears. Canada is blind. Canada is an invalid. Canada is only a month and a half sicker than Denmark.

"What if…!" He blurts. "W-what if we came with you? Can you fix them? Back at your colony?"

America blinks. "Well, maybe. There are so many people sick with this, we have to find a cure eventually."

Eventually. What a word *that* is.

Denmark sighs and pulls back to sit beside Peter again. "You said the submarine is going to the North Sea. Is it going to be stopping anywhere in Scandinavia?"

Canada nods. "They were planning to anchor as close to Gothenburg as they could. We aren't sure how much of Sweden the water has gotten to, but they think that's where they'll find most of the survivors from Finland and Norway."

"And your place too," Alfred adds when he notices the flinch that flits across Denmark's face.

"And what about here in Germany?"

Canada's eyebrows rise. "We're in Germany?"

"Oh, yeah, forgot to tell you." America laughs. "They think the water's moved pretty far in, so I think they're planning to take rowboats from Sweden to Berlin and start picking people up there. So, I guess that's where we all need to go."

"Correction," Denmark holds up a hand. "That's where *you two* need to go. We'll meet up with you in Sweden."

"You're going to Sweden?" Canada sits up a bit. "How?"

"We think Poland is still running a boat up and down the Baltic Sea."

"And if he's not?"

"I dunno. We'll figure something out."

Canada hums. "That seems dangerous."

"So does sleeping alone in a buried airplane while your over-eager brother wanders around without a map."

"Touché."

Denmark sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Listen, we can't stay here long. Especially knowing that we only have two months to try and find everyone before the submarine gets here." He looks up. "I think you should come with us. We ran into Netherlands awhile back and he told us that Germany was on his way to Leipzig with a bunch of survivors. He said France and England were with him and it's not far from Berlin. We can help you get that far and then you can start spreading the word around the shelters."

America brightens considerably. "England and France are okay? Really?"

Denmark grimaces. "I don't know how much truth to it there is, but it's worth looking into."

"U-uh…" Canada wrings his hands. "I don't suppose… I don't suppose that's where Netherlands was headed too?"

"No."

"He didn't stay with you?"

"No, listen, Canada, I know you guys were friends, so I don't really want to do this…"

"Oh." Canada leans back, a small smile on his lips. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"I think so."

"I see. And Belgium?"

"Same."

There is a long, awkward pause while Canada scrubs at his eyes, and America looks torn between excitement and wanting to punch Denmark in the teeth.

"The point is," Denmark says after a minute. "If you want to get out of here, getting to Leipzig is going to be your best chance. If that's where survivors are going, that means they have some kind of transportation. Jan said they had carts, so they could help Matthew get to Berlin. And if you do manage to find Arthur and Francis, even better."

"I don't know," America murmurs. "We haven't really moved at all from here. I've seen what people do to each other at the trading post, though, and I'm not sure it's safe to leave, especially with Mattie not being able to walk."

"We could make a sled or something. Take turns towing him." Denmark frowns. "It's up to you guys, though. We'll stay for a few days to stock up in town, but after that, we're leaving. We've gotta get moving."

Peter pulls his knees up to his chin and swallows the cold feeling that starts to rise in his throat while America and Canada weigh their options. It's unsaid, but Peter can hear it perfectly clear in Denmark's voice. He knows what he means.

They need to leave as soon as possible because they only have a month and a half before Denmark can't walk anymore.

A/N: HUFF HUFF HUFF oh my God, I have destroyed my writer's block, apparently. I guess all I needed was a little sleep and a good brainstorm session with my roommate. Glee! /o/

So yeah, that's how America and Canada got there and that's why they're there. I hope it was clear that they're looking for England and France… I think that fact kind of got swallowed up by back-story. I hope that everything made sense!

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Plans for the next several days are made loosely over the course of the entire day. Canada and America both reason that Leipzig is their best chance to get out, but can't agree on whether or not it is a good idea. They both want to find England and France and get everyone out safely, and America wants to get Canada home for a cure, but Matthew doesn't want to be a burden or risk to anyone's safety. After being updated on the state of humanity in Europe by way of stories from Denmark, he becomes especially resistant and spends over an hour trying to convince them to make for Leipzig without him.

"Ivan can come find me when he brings the submarines," he tries. "I can hold out until then."

Denmark is quick to remind him that without his eyes, he's going to have a damn hard time feeding himself and keeping the fire lit.

By the time they reach an agreement, it's well past midnight and Peter is only half-awake, resting under a blanket with his head in Denmark's lap, listening groggily while Denmark's fingers run through his hair. He's tired of hearing America's loud arguing and Canada's shy martyrdom. It seems stupid to him. It's obvious that Alfred has no intention of changing his mind and Denmark can't get a word in edgewise one way or the other, so, as Peter sees it, the discussion should have been over hours ago. They could have spent the time in town collecting supplies and getting ready instead of wasting it going back and forth, repeating the same things over and over again. They don't *have* any time left to waste.

In the end, just as he predicts, they agree to come with them to Leipzig, but only if they are able to find some way to easily transport Canada.

"There's no snow or anything, so a sled would be dumb," Alfred muses while he restocks the fire for the night. "I've seen shopping

carts at the trading post before though. That would be big enough, right?"

Peter can feel Denmark sigh.

"Anything with wheels means we can't go through the woods. We're going to have to follow the highways and roads." His hand stills on Peter's head. "That's going to make it twice as dangerous."

Canada nods. "I understand if you don't want to accompany us."

"That's not what I mean," Denmark snaps. "We aren't just going to leave you to fend for yourselves. Alfred didn't even know he was in Germany, I'm not even going to imagine him trying to navigate it by himself." He exhales loudly and resumes stroking Peter's hair. "We'll take you as far as Leipzig. But I want to make something very, very clear before we go."

Alfred peers around the chimney. "What?"

"If there is ever a situation where our safety is in jeopardy, he's my first priority, got it?"

"Well, yeah, I figured."

"I mean it." Denmark stares intently at him. "If we're being chased or run down or anything, you're on your own." He looks down and Peter pretends to be asleep. "If getting him out alive means leaving you behind, I'll do it. End of story."

"We understand," Matthew smiles. "We'll try to find our own map in town tomorrow, just in case we have to separate."

"Good." Denmark doesn't look up at them, still focused on Peter. He pulls the blankets up and tucks them around his shoulders. "Do you have any weapons you can bring with you? Knives, guns, anything?"

America snorts loudly. "You kidding? Of course I've got a gun, who the hell do you think I am?"

Denmark finally tilts his head up to stare warily at him. "Okay, you've got a gun, good. Do you have any *bullets* for it?"

He grins sheepishly. "Well… I have a few left." He reaches around to grab his bag off of the hook and draws out a silver revolver. "Smith and Wesson .38," he says. "It holds six and I've got four left."

"I don't believe it for a second that you only came in with six rounds."

"Of course I didn't!" He huffs and stuffs the gun away. "I *had* a ton, but the boxes all went out when we crashed. Flew right off with the wings and exploded somewhere."

Denmark gives him a blank stare. "You have got to be the luckiest mother fucker on the planet, you know that? It's a miracle that the people here didn't immediately find you."

"Good things still can happen," Canada says lightly. "Besides the revolver, we also have a hunting knife and a lead pipe."

"Let me guess-"

"Yes, it's Russia's."

"Right." Denmark shakes his head and leans back, his hand dropping to Peter's shoulder. "So, we have a plan then?"

"Yep!" Alfred slaps the chimney door shut and hangs his pack back up. "I'll take you to the trading post tomorrow morning and then we can leave the day after." He starts to slip into bed next to Canada, but pauses to look back at Denmark. "It's kind of a scary place. Peter can stay here with Mattie if he wants to."

Denmark's hand tightens around Peter's shoulder. "No. We stick together."

"Are you sure? I mean, the people there are kind of spooky. Like, horror movie spooky."

"He's been with me to one market already, he can handle it."

"I'm serious, it's really, really sc-"

"Alfred." Denmark cuts him off sharply. "He's a lot braver than a boy his age should ever be. He's made it this far just fine and he's seen some gross shit. He's not a little kid; give him some credit."

"Right," Alfred quickly switches off the lamp to avoid looking Denmark in the eye, dropping the plane into complete darkness except for a thin line of orange that borders the chimney door. He ducks down under the covers and cuddles up to Matthew. "Sorry. I'll see you guys in the morning."

"Goodnight," Canada adds. "If you get cold, we have a few spare blankets."

Denmark carefully shifts Peter out of his lap and onto the floor, pulling their own blankets over them both and settling down beside him. "We'll be fine. Goodnight."

Peter waits until he is absolutely sure America and Canada are sleeping before he reaches out to gently shake Denmark's shoulder. "Are you awake?" He whispers.

"Mmhmm," Denmark murmurs into the covers. "Wassup? Something the matter?"

"No," Peter pauses, smiling to himself. "Um, I just wanted to say thank you."

"What for?"

"For sticking up for me a little while ago. You're the first person who's said I'm not a little kid."

Denmark's hand appears from somewhere in the dark and ruffles his hair, but he says nothing, instead just laughing quietly under his breath. It's then that Peter realizes that he is still wearing the

respirator mask. He's never worn it this long while inside before. Peter bites his lip and reaches out to curl his fingers around Denmark's wrist.

"Hey, Denmark?"

"Mm?"

"You're going to be okay, right?"

Denmark sighs, long and heavy, and drops his free arm around Peter's shoulders, rubbing small circles into his back. "Yeah," he says after a moment. "I'm gonna be just fine."

"Do you promise?"

"Promise what?"

"That you won't die."

Denmark shifts up and turns over onto his side to face him. "Everyone dies someday, Peter."

"I know, but… I mean sometime soon."

A pause.

"I'm not going to die yet, kiddo. We've still got too much work to do." He jerks his head somewhere in the direction of America and Canada. "And now we gotta look out for them too. We've got too much to do to worry about dying right now."

"So, do you promise?"

"Yeah, I promise."

Peter wriggles his arm free of the blankets and holds his pinky out. "Pinky swear it."

Denmark is quiet for a moment before he laughs and hooks his pinky with Peter's. "You really are a little kid, y'know that?"

Peter flushes and stuffs himself under the covers.

"Shut up."

Sleep comes to him quickly despite the muffled coughing coming from Canada's corner of the plane and the dull creaks and groans of the plane. Even without walking for the entire day, the constant stream of activity and loud arguing has left him exhausted and the relief that seeps into his bones when his body starts to relax brings the most welcome state of empty mindedness that he nods off within minutes, tucked against Denmark in the blissful quiet. Beneath the covers, he can ignore the sounds around him. He can focus on absolutely nothing and while he doesn't dream, he is more than content with the vast blackness behind his eyes.

His rest is short lived, however.

He wakes in the middle of the night, several hours later, because he is cold. As he pulls himself back to the waking world in slow, steady waves, he's dimly aware that the fire is still lit, popping inside the chimney, but his primary source of heat is missing. That source being, of course, Denmark. He thinks at first that maybe he is still unconscious, but just to be sure, he scrubs his hands over his eyes and blinks the thick, sleepy feeling from them, sitting up and letting the blankets fall around his waist. Canada and America are still sound asleep if Alfred's snoring is any indication, but he finds Denmark seated next to the wall, the flashlight in one hand and his cheek in the other. He's sitting on his knees and peering into the cracked mirror hanging from a stripped bolt in the panel, the light angled enough that he can see his face.

The mask is on the floor next to him.

"Denmark?" Peter mumbles. "What time is it?"

He doesn't turn away from the mirror. "Late."

"What are you doing?"

"You should go back to sleep, Peter. We're going to have a long walk into the city today."

Peter frowns in concern. He pulls the covers off of his legs and starts to crawl over next to him. "What's the matter?"

Denmark glances over at him. He has a thin line of blood streaming down his temple, a trail that starts from near his hairline where the butt of a pistol struck deep several weeks ago, leaving a thick scab that is now missing entirely. "Nothing's the matter."

Peter's eyes widen a fraction and he stops in front of him. "You're bleeding."

"I know."

"What happened?"

"Nothing." He lifts his free hand and wags his index finger, the tip of which is stained red. "I did it on purpose."

His eyebrows knit. "What?"

Denmark turns back to look in the mirror. "I don't want it to heal all the way. I want it to scar first."

"Why?"

He shrugs and looks over his shoulder. "It's the last thing he gave me." He wipes the back of his hand across his cheek to clean it off. "I want to keep it."

"Oh."

"Do you think that's weird?"

Peter shakes his head. "I guess not." He shifts forward and catches the last, rogue smear of blood with his knuckle, drawing it away from Denmark's skin and onto his own, and scuffs it away on the leg of his jeans. "You should try to sleep."

Denmark offers him a lopsided smile. "Yes, mom."

Peter rolls his eyes. "Take your own advice, dummy." He grabs Denmark's arm and drags him back to their nest of blankets on the wall, rolling his eyes when Denmark tips over dramatically.

"What, no story?"

"Just go to sleep." He clicks off the flashlight and flops down next to him. "Jeez, and you call me a little kid."

Denmark chuckles, but relents, and tugs the blankets up. Again, the plane settles into an easy silence and Peter spends a long time lying on his side, just staring through the dark at the dim outline of Denmark's face.

"It's not weird," he murmurs to himself and runs the tip of his finger over the pad of his thumb, over the hard, vertical strip of calloused skin that rests there; an old paper cut from a week before The Calamity. It's healed now, but is well scarred over thanks to his constant picking at it over the months spent alone in the bunker. He had wanted it to scar too. It's not exactly battle damage or a badge of combat. But even still, it was something he wanted to keep.

It's the last inane little scrape that Finland ever kissed better.

In the morning, Alfred rouses them by way of ripping the covers off and shouting a far too enthusiastic good morning.

"Good morning, ladies!" He chimes and throws their blankets into the pile surrounding Matthew. "Time to get up and moving! Up, up, up, lot's to do!"

Peter groans and sits up, fixing a hard glare on America as his attention is diverted to packing up his bag for the day and opening breakfast for he and his brother. The plane is still dark, lit only by the lamp, but there is enough light streaming through the door that he can tell that it's at least past dawn, something he assumes he should be thankful for given the excited manner he's been woken in.

"Do you always wake up this happy?" Peter yawns.

"Huh?" America's head pops out from behind the chimney. "What're you talking about? I'm in a terrible mood!"

Peter stares at him through his bangs. "If this is you in a bad mood, I don't ever want to see you in a good mood."

Canada laughs from under the covers. "You saw him in a decent mood yesterday when you found each other, didn't you?"

"Ugh, yeah." He scrubs his eyes and yawns again. "Let's not do that again."

He turns slightly to look down at Denmark. Remarkably, he's still asleep despite America's loud puttering and rude awakening, turned on his side with an arm beneath his head and eyes lightly shut above his mask. Peter pauses and studies him for a moment. Shadows run deep in his face, caught in crevices around his cheeks and eyes, and already, he is in need of another haircut. But through the bruises still lingering on his skin and his gaunt appearance, he looks peaceful in rest. The perpetual worry lines around his eyes are eased and his eyebrows aren't creasing his forehead like they always seem to. He looks calm. He looks relaxed.

He looks like a ghost.

Peter reaches out to shake his shoulder. "It's time to get up."

Denmark makes no move to do so. He continues to lay still, head cradled in the crook of his arm, his eyelashes not even fluttering

when Peter shakes him again.

Peter frowns. "Denmark, c'mon. We gotta get ready."

Again, nothing.

Something hard and cold begins to settle into his stomach. He curls his fingers into Denmark's sweater. "Denmark?"

America appears beside him, a fork in his mouth. "Step aside, little man, I've got this." He pops the utensil free of his lips and sets his can of string beans aside, licking his index finger a few times before he bends down and sticks it straight into Denmark's ear.

Denmark's eyes snap open and he flies upright, smacking his palm over his ear. "Dude, what the *fuck?* " He furiously wipes the sleeve of his shirt against his face. "What are you, five?"

America laughs heartily and resumes eating his beans. "Got you up, didn't it?" He slaps Denmark's back, knocking him forward, and goes back to help Canada with his own breakfast. "Get a move on, sleeping beauty, we gotta get going."

Denmark glares at him and scrubs his wrist over his ear one last time. "Dick," he coughs. "Who the hell does that? Eugh, that's so gross." He drops his hand into his lap and sighs, an eyebrow rising when he catches the stricken look on Peter's face. "What's the matter? Did he wake you up like that too?"

Peter stares at him. "I kept trying to wake you up," he murmurs quietly. "But you wouldn't…"

"Oh." Denmark pulls the mask down around his neck, leaning down to peer at him. "I was just having a good dream is all." He reaches out to muss Peter's hair. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

"I'm not scared, I'm just…" he trails off, frustrated. "Worried. Or something. I don't know."

"Hey, I promised you, didn't I?" Denmark grins and pats his back. "I don't break promises, kiddo. Even Sweden can vouch for me on that, as much as I'm sure it pisses him off to do so." He catches Peter's chin and turns his face up to look him in the eye. "You don't have to worry, okay? Now come on, I think Alfred's going to explode if we don't start getting ready soon."

Peter snorts and starts to pull his coat on. "I wish he *would* explode. Maybe then we could get some sleep."

Denmark laughs. "Yeah, but then we'd also have a plane full of exploded American." He snaps his mask back on and starts to lace his boots. "And that's disgusting."

America throws a pillow at them. "Hey, I can hear you, y'know! And I'll have you know, my insides are just as awesome as my outsides, so even if I did explode, I'd still be just as cool as I am now."

Peter and Denmark exchange deadpanned glances and roll their eyes.

"So, how is this going to work?" Denmark asks after a moment. "Matthew, are you just going to stay here?"

"Yes, I'll be waiting here."

"Isn't that kind of risky?"

"No less risky than if I were to go with you." He sits up and motions toward Alfred. "He's generally quick whenever he goes out. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure you don't want Alfred to stay with you? I mean, he can just show us on the map where the trading post is and we can find it ourselves."

"No can do!" America pops on a pair of dirt-streaked goggles and starts to put on his backpack. "I don't know how to find it on a map. I

gotta just take you there. Mattie will be fine. We've done this lots of times!" He turns to face them completely, hands on his hips. "Are you ready yet?"

Peter looks up at Denmark and then back to America. "I think so."

"Good, let's go then!" He spins around and gives Canada a quick hug, pausing just long enough to run his hand down his matted hair. "We'll be back soon."

Matthew smiles. "Stay safe."

"You too!" A quick salute and America moves to push the plane's door open a sliver, slow and cautious, peeking out and waiting, then shoving it up all the way and pulling himself out. "Come on!" He calls in. "Everything out here's fine!"

Denmark pats Peter's shoulder. "I'm gonna go ahead and go out first this time, okay? I'll help you out in a minute."

"Okay."

While Denmark hauls his way free of the plane, Peter sidesteps to crouch down next to Canada, tapping his arm to get his attention.

"You really can't see anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Does… does it hurt?"

Canada tilts his head slightly. "Being blind?"

"Yes. Well, no. Everything, I mean. Like breathing? Does breathing hurt?"

Canada's smile is small and just as empty as his eyes. "Worse than anything."

From above them, Peter can hear Denmark coughing and it makes his stomach twist.

True to his word, Alfred is able to lead them straight to the trading post in the middle of the city. Unlike the last one they stopped at, this one is indoors, placed in the gutted remains of blackened community center. It has no roof and the windows are all shattered, but there are enough streaky footprints in the ash that blankets the floor that Peter can still see the faded yellow and black lines that run along the sides. A basketball court, he reasons. If he squints through the dim light, he can even see the frayed remains of a net, still mounted to a crooked bar above the vendors. He momentarily entertains the idea of crumpling a piece of paper to throw through it, but shakes the thought free almost as quickly as it comes; it's a childish want and they don't have time for it.

Denmark suggests that they split up and meet back at the front doors in half an hour, taking Peter by the hand and leading him to the first row of stalls while Alfred flounces off to try and find something to carry Canada in. Though this one is bigger, much of what is being offered is exactly the same, just in larger quantities. He can see stacks of cardboard boxes, filled to the brim with newspapers and bits of plastic, and more stuffed animals than he can keep track of. Like the first, the whole structure reeks of humanity and it only gets worse as they get closer to the center line of peddlers, an overwhelming stench of mud and sweat washing over them so thickly that Peter actually gags and pulls his scarf up around his nose.

They stop in front of two young women seated in rusty lawn chairs. They have a blanket spread out beneath them, several dented cans and a bin full of passports arranged neatly by their feet. At first, Peter thinks that they are just going to move on to the next stall. The people just a few steps further have bottles of water and ration packs, all of which are in much better condition than what the women have, but Denmark stops directly in front of them and snatches up

one of the cans. It's the only one that has a label still, a dingy light blue with red letters.

"Where did you get this?" He demands and shoves the can at them.

The two women exchanged worried glances and explain to him that they brought it with them. They both have thick accents, almost a stutter, and at once, Denmark's eyes widen and he begins to speak to them in a rapid language that Peter does not understand. It's not Danish, he knows that much. It's too fluid and pretty. Musical, even, spoken from the tip of his tongue unlike the hard curses that he's taught Peter to choke through.

There is a pause in the conversation and they hand Denmark the box full of passports, showing him the crest on the front. Before Peter can see what the writing says, it is dropped back into the box and Denmark is grabbing the hands of the one who showed him, kneeling low and pressing his forehead to her wrist.

"Thank you," he says quietly. He lets go of the startled brunet and pulls a blanket from their pack, pushing it into her arms in exchange for the cans, which he places back in the bag all except one. "Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you." Again, he slips into that fluttery language and blathers his way through what Peter assumes to be more expressions of gratitude for several more seconds, eyes shining when he straightens up and takes Peter's hand again.

He leads him out of the stalls and to the wall, too quick for Peter to get a word in, and promptly collapses onto the floor once they are out of the way, pulling the mask down and laughing into his hands. Alarmed, Peter drops down beside him and tentatively reaches out to take the can with the blue label. The words are written in a thin, swoopy font, pale red and bright against the label. It's torn on one side, but Peter couldn't make heads of tails of it even if it weren't.

He looks up at Denmark, who still has his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with barely subdued chuckles. He taps his shoulder, blinking in surprise when Denmark lifts his head and meets

his stare with wet, red eyes and the biggest smile Peter has seen him wear since finding Netherlands.

"What's so funny?" He asks and holds up the can. "What is this?"

Denmark laughs again and gingerly takes the can from him, turning it around to face him and pointing at the label. "Grænmeti súpa," he says, voice just barely wavering. "Grænmeti súpa, fuckin' vegetable soup. It's vegetable soup."

Peter stares at him. He knows for a fact that they have at least two cans of vegetable soup of their own left. "What's so funny about it?"

"Nothing's funny. I just never thought I'd be so goddamn happy to see this crappy soup again." He waves the can, grinning. "There's only one place I've ever seen this before."

"Where?"

"Discount grocery stores." He breaks out in another watery grin and wipes his eyes on the back of his coat sleeve. "Discount grocery stores in Iceland. It costs a hundred krónur for one can and it tastes like salty piss and it's from fuckin' *Iceland.* "

It takes a moment for this to sink in, but as soon as it does, Peter's face bursts into a wide smile and he grabs the can back, spinning it in his palm and running his fingers over the label. "So, you were talking in Icelandic back there? Those ladies are from Iceland?"

Denmark nods enthusiastically. "They said that the North side of the island is in ruins, but Reykjavík is still standing. A German ferry picked them up a few months ago and brought them here. They said there's another boat that came a few times." He grabs Peter's shoulders and shakes him happily. "A boat flying a Norwegian flag."

Peter drops the can and throws his arms around Denmark's neck, laughing hysterically when the star struck Dane stands up and swings him around, clutching him tightly and laughing right along

with him, completely oblivious to the confused stares being shot their way by passersby. By the time they manage to calm down, Denmark's face is flushed and he's still laughing, hard enough that he has to pull the mask back on before he can pull Peter back into the crowd.

"C'mon!" He calls. "Let's hurry so we can finish and get going!"

Peter agrees heartily and scurries after him. They're able to haggle themselves enough food to last a week and America finds a shopping cart with a rickety wheel, but as they leave, Peter knows they've already found their most important item at the market.

They've found a new sliver of hope.

When they return back to the plane later in the evening, America and Canada get the same speech Peter did before he left the bunker with Denmark.

"Bring only what you think you'll need. Blankets, food, first aid, that kind of stuff. Leave anything that might weigh you down."

Matthew is quick to remind Alfred that no, his Super Man action figure is not an essential item, and the two of them begin to make a list of things to bring while Denmark and Peter sort through their items, checking and double checking to ensure that they don't forget anything. Mostly, though, they are already packed and while they wait for the other two, Denmark grabs their bag, motions for Peter to follow him to the door of the plane and proclaims that they are going for a walk. He smiles at Peter's confused expression and just helps him hoist himself through the opening back outside.

"We aren't going far," he tells Alfred as he pulls himself through as well. "Holler if you need anything." He shuts the door and rearranges the camouflage netting over the crushed metal.

"Where *are* we going?" Peter asks him. "Isn't it getting kind of late to go on a walk?"

Denmark brushes off his hands. "Well, we're not really gonna go for a walk." He turns around to face Peter and smiles again. "I just wanted to talk to you about something."

"Something important?"

"Something important."

Peter's heart sinks. At once, his mind is going to dark places; Denmark wants to go back on his promise. Denmark wants to

prepare him for his death. Denmark wants to put him in charge of things.

He bites his lip and looks at his feet. "What is it?"

"Earlier, when we were at the flea market, I noticed that you were looking at the basketball hoops."

Peter blinks. "Huh?"

"The hoops. While we were walking through the stalls, you kept looking at them. Do you like basketball?"

"Well… yeah, I guess so?" He looks up at Denmark and pauses. He still has a smile on his face, but his stare is dead serious. "Why?"

"I was just wondering why you didn't ask if you could throw something through them while we were there. There were plenty of little rocks and stuff you could've used."

Peter scrunches up his nose. "That's weird. That's what you wanted to talk about?"

Denmark's eyes bore into his. "I'm serious. Why didn't you want to toss something around?"

Peter looks down at his shoes again. "I don't know."

"Peter…" Denmark's voice has an edge of warning to it.

"It seemed like a stupid thing to ask to do," Peter grumbles and fiddles with the zipper pull on his coat. "We needed to hurry and there isn't any time to play games. And besides, playing games like that is for little kids."

Denmark clicks his tongue. He crouches down so that he is at eye-level with him and peers at him, his gaze somewhere between amused and curious. "You didn't want to play rock-hoops because…?"

"It's childish."

"I thought you might say that," he laughs. He claps a hand against Peter's shoulder and nearly knocks him sideways. "Listen, just because you're not a little kid, you don't have to be grown up all the time. Half the fun of being an adult is being able to be immature sometimes. If you ever want to stop and kick a can around or something, you just have to say so."

"That's okay." Peter looks at him and nods sternly. "I don't want to play any games. We don't have time to play around."

"We have time right now, don't we?"

Peter starts to say something, but snaps his mouth shut. He can't deny that Denmark has him there. "We should be resting before we leave tomorrow." He pokes Denmark's shoulder. "Especially you."

He grins. "You sound exactly like Iceland, you know that?"

"What?"

"I had this exact same talk with Iceland in the forties. He had to take over some stuff for me while I was occupied by Germany." His smile takes on a sadder shade and he scratches his chin, shrugging. "By the time everything was said and done, he was independent and was all serious business. Once we were all healed up, I tried to get him out of his house to have a reunion party with the rest of us and he told me the exact same thing. 'We don't have time to play around.'" He shakes his head. "Said he had too much paperwork and delegating to do."

"Didn't he want to see you all again?"

"Of course he did. But he also felt like he needed to prove himself to us. He wanted to show us that he could be just as good at his job as we were. And you wanna know why?"

"Why?"

He points at him. "Because he grew up too fast."

Peter frowns just a bit and sighs heavily. "I think this is a little different."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How so?"

"Because this time we really *don't* have time to play around."

Denmark exhales loudly, flapping his lips and shooting Peter an uneven, smarmy grin. "Again with that." He stands up suddenly and grabs Peter by the shoulders. He spins him around and motions in front of them. "What does that look like to you?"

Peter stares. The only remarkable thing before them is a large tree, scorched, but otherwise solid, thick branches still attached to it's bare trunk. "A tree?"

"Right. And what do you do with trees?"

"Um…" Peter is sure this must be a trick question. "Cut them down and make firewood?"

"No, no, no." He releases his shoulders and moves to the base of the trunk. He drops their bag on top of the dusty roots and stretches his arms above himself, grabbing hold of the lowest branch and hauling himself up with a loud groan.

"What are you doing?" Peter hurries forward. Denmark has absolutely no business dragging himself up the trunk like that; not while he's coughing up blood every day.

"Making a point," Denmark grunts and pulls himself up another level. He's about a third of the way up the tall tree, not terribly high, but enough so that a fall would definitely hurt. "Trees," he says and swings his legs over a wide branch, letting his feet dangle in the air while he folds his arms over a smaller limb in front of it, staring down at Peter, out of breath, but grinning mischievously. "Are for climbing."

"Come down from there!" Peter calls. He plants his hands on his hips and frowns up at him. "You're gonna fall!"

"I dunno," Denmark drawls. "I'm pretty comfy. Why don't you come up and sit here with me?"

"No! Now, come on!"

He leans over the branch and frowns at him. "Come on, it's fun."

"I know, but-"

"Look in the backpack," Denmark interrupts him. "I got you a present today."

"What?"

"Just do it. It's in the front pocket."

Peter scowls, but moves forward to unzip the front panel, rummaging around in the deep net until his hand closes around something smooth and bumpy. He draws it out, raising an eyebrow. Its round and made of rubber and covered in little green and purple nubs. "It's…" he curls his fingers in and it makes a wheezy squeaking sound. "A dog toy?"

"Right."

Peter stares up at him. "You got me a dog toy?"

"It was the closest thing I could find to a ball. Now, here," he leans over the branch and holds his arms out, linking his hands together

and making a bony hoop. "I'll make the swishy noise and everything."

He deadpans. "What are you doing?"

"Being a basketball hoop, what does it look like I'm doing?"

"You're being weird. Hurry up and come down, you're going to hurt yourself."

"I'll come down if you throw it."

"Denmark, please, we shouldn't be playing at a time like this." He clamps his hands around the toy. "I don't want you get hurt."

Denmark lowers his hands and sighs. "Peter," he says seriously. "We have a saying back at my place. 'Enhver er sin egen lykkes smed.' You wanna know what it means?"

"What?"

"It means that everyone makes their own happiness. You can't just sit around and wait for something good to happen, you have to make it happen yourself, even if it's something as simple as throwing a ball through a hoop." He folds his arms and rests his chin on them. "If you want to play and have fun, don't stop to think about whether or not people are going to think it's childish or stupid. It's about what makes you feel good, not them."

"Well, I know that, but…" he pauses. "Nobody takes me seriously as it is."

"So? Nobody takes me seriously either and I'm older than almost everyone I know." He cocks his head and smiles again. "You're still allowed to be a kid sometimes, Peter. If something childish makes you happy, then do it anyway. It's how everyone else does it and I promise you, no one is going to think any less of you for it."

"Really?"

"Really." He leans forward. "Wanna know something?"

"Okay?"

"Norway still sleeps with stuffed animals."

His eyes widen. "Really?"

"Yep. And Iceland likes to play dress-up with his puffin. That's why it always has that little tie on." He grins. "Berwald likes to knit, but he doesn't tell anyone. You remember that hat and mitten set he gave you for Christmas that one year?"

"He made that?"

"Yep. It took him a week because he couldn't decide on colors for the yarn."

He grins. "What about Finland?"

"Ahh, Tino has a good one too. When he takes his rifles out to clean them, he makes them talk to each other. Y'know, kinda like how some little girls play with dolls? Like that, except with shit that can blow your face off." He smiles. "The point is, all of us do silly stuff because we *like* to. It's fun and no matter how bad things get, having fun should always be important. Especially when things are this awful." He holds his arms out again. "Now, you wanted to throw something through a hoop, so do it. If you can sink this shot, I'll come down and I won't tell anybody."

"Really?"

"Really."

Peter pauses and weighs his options for a moment. It's embarrassing and Denmark has the dopiest grin on his face, but his eagerness is infectious. He draws his hand back. It's just to get him out of the tree, he thinks to himself. Nothing more.

The toy sails through Denmark's arms and bounces against the trunk of the tree.

"Score!" Denmark throws his hands up. "There, see? Fun right?"

Peter laughs. "You're a dork."

"Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say." He sighs and starts to pull back. "All right, hang on, I'm coming down."

"Wait!"

Denmark looks up, surprised, and Peter flushes.

"H-hold on, stay there." He hurries over to the tree and grabs hold of the first branch, pulling himself and carefully balancing on each limb as he makes his way up. He doesn't even want to look up. He knows exactly the sort of smug look that he's going to find on Denmark's face if he does, so he just continues to concentrate on climbing the tree without slipping and cracking his head open on the hard ground. After a minute of careful clamoring, he plops himself down next to Denmark and wraps his arms around the nearest branch to keep anchored, his legs not quite long enough to sit as comfortably. They aren't up high enough to see over the treetops, but he can still see *through* the skeletal remains of the forest, enough so that he can see the highway through the ash and fading daylight.

Denmark nudges him. "There, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Shut up." He mumbles. "I just… I just kind of like climbing trees, okay? And you were probably stuck anyway, so I have to help you down."

Denmark just laughs and leans back over to rest his head against his arms. A stretch of silence drifts down from the sky with the usual parade of floating dust and for several minutes, they both just stare out into the trees, lost in their own heads long enough to enjoy the view, bleak as it may be.

"What about you?" Peter asks after a moment.

"Hm?"

"Everybody else has silly things they like to do, so what's yours?"

Denmark smiles. "Baking," he says. "I like to bake."

"Really?"

"Really. I've got the apron and pastry bags and everything."

"Are you any good at it?"

"The best." He laughs into his elbow. "Someday, when we make it home, I'll make you something so you can see for yourself."

"That would be nice."

"Yeah, it would, wouldn't it?"

Another pause draws in with the sinking sun and Peter pulls his coat a little tighter. It's starting to get cold and darkness is making a rapid approach into the woods. He figures that America should be about done packing by now and when they return to the plane, there won't be much left to do besides go to sleep, waking in the morning back in the same reality that he's been trudging through for the last several months. Walking through endless gray and worrying. He likes looking out into the trees like this. From this height in such dim light, it almost looks like the trees have only shed their leaves for the fall, standing naked in a crisp Autumn night rather than burnt and dead in a landscape of miserable ash. It almost feels like pretending.

"You cold?"

Peter nods. "A little."

Denmark drops an arm around his shoulders and rubs his arm. "We can go inside now if you want."

"No, that's okay," he tips sideways, just enough to lean against him. "Can we stay up here for a little longer?"

Even without looking, he can tell Denmark is smiling again.

"Sure we can, kiddo."

Morning comes far too soon.

They set out just before dawn, while the skies are still dark and the air is crisp enough to see their breath through flashlight beams, swept close to the ground as they file out of the plane and start for the highway. Wrapped in blankets, Matthew rides on Alfred's back, still half asleep, while Denmark carries the shopping cart, tipped upside down and resting on his shoulders. The ground is too uneven to push either of them until they get closer to the road. It's a factor none of them had taken into account when they brought the cart back and while Denmark doesn't complain, Peter knows full well that he is irritated by the task of hauling the rickety thing through the woods, trying to make his way through the broken branches and stiff underbrush as quietly at he can with a giant, metal basket over his head. He had offered to help him carry it, but Denmark had declined and simply requested that he hang on to their bag until they get to the highway.

It isn't a long walk, but the going is slow. America is still strong enough that he can balance Canada's weight with his own like it's the easiest thing in the world and he keeps getting ahead of them without realizing it. He doesn't realize that he's doing it until Matthew notices that he can no longer hear their footsteps and makes him stop and wait, patting his arm and chiding him when he huffs at Denmark to pick up the pace when they finally do catch up.

"Be patient," he says softly. "It's harder for the rest of us."

Denmark is too out of breath to reply one way or the other and just glares at America from behind his goggles.

Sunlight is just beginning to work through the ash when they reach the highway and they all turn their flashlights off, not wanting to risk bouncing the light off of the reflective bumps beneath the grime. Denmark eases the cart back down and keeps it from rolling back while Alfred carefully places Matthew into the basket. He rearranges the blankets around him, his hands slow and careful, and helps him lie back against the sloped edge at the head of the cart so that he is facing the push-bar.

"Comfy?"

A smile and a nod.

"Good!" He leans down and gently ties a strip of thick canvas around Matthew's head, over his nose and mouth, and drapes the last blanket over his head, pausing for just a moment to touch his hair before securing the covers in place with a clothespin on his shoulder. He sets their bags in his lap and gives him one more friendly nudge after he shoos Denmark away from the handles and takes them himself, pushing the cart in a slow half-turn to the center of the street.

"Try to stay as far away from the cars as you can," Denmark tells him, taking Peter's hand and following after them. "There might be people sleeping in them."

"I know, I know," America waves over his shoulder. "We'll be careful." He slows down enough for Denmark and Peter to fall into step beside him. "So, which way are we headed?"

"East."

"How long do you think it'll take?"

He shrugs. "As long as it does."

"Which is how long?"

"I don't know," he sighs. "At the rate we're going, a week maybe?"

America frowns. "If we hurry, we could make it there faster."

"Thank you for elaborating on that, I never would have come to that conclusion on my own."

"Geez," he huffs and turns back to the road. "You're grumpy when it's this early."

Denmark ignores the implication entirely and shakes his head. "If you want to hurry, fine. But I can't go any faster than I already am."

"Why not?"

"Alfred," Canada interrupts the conversation before it can go much further and places his hand on America's. "It's going to be fine. Seven days isn't bad, all things considered, and we'll still beat Ivan there." He leans sideways, toward Denmark. "I'm sorry, he's not very good at reading the atmosphere."

Denmark coughs. "I've noticed."

"You'll get used to it."

"Mattie, that's mean," Alfred pouts. "I'm fine at reading the atmosphere, he's just a jerk."

Canada smiles at Denmark. "You see?"

"Right."

"He doesn't mean anything by it. He really does like you a lot, you know."

"Maaattie…"

"It's true." He grins and leans back in the cart. "The first night you were with us, he kept going on and on about how excited he was

that it was you he found." He reaches out and taps Alfred's hand. "What was it that you said? 'Denmark's the coolest Eurobro in Europe'?"

"I… might have said something like that." He turns his nose up. "But I don't remember."

Denmark quirks an eyebrow. "What?" He exchanges a bemused glance with Peter. "You think I'm cool? Why?"

"Don't get a big head. I just think it's kind of cool how you used to... you know…" he mutters something under his breath. "Y'know."

Denmark's eyebrow goes impossibly higher. "I used to what?"

Canada grins. "You used to celebrate the forth of July."

"Matt!"

He shrugs innocently. "What? It's true."

Denmark laughs. "Well, I hate to break it to you, big guy, but I don't think Rebild Bakker is still around." He claps his shoulder. "I'll still sing you happy birthday, though."

"Really?"

"Eh, why not?" He drops his hand back to his pocket. "From the sounds of things, we'll be back at your place in July anyway." He looks down at Peter and the corners of his eyes crinkle when he smiles. "Right?"

Peter swallows. July is nearly half a year away.

"Yeah," he tries to grin. "Right."

Not too far off from Denmark's prediction, they make it to the outskirts of Leipzig in nine days. It's a longer period of time than

America had hoped for, something he has been very vocal about over the last several days every time they have stopped to rest or to make camp for the night. He wants to rush. He wants to take the whole journey at a run because he wants to get Canada out of the ash and he wants to find England and France and he has too much pent up *want* to be walking so slow. He tries to egg Denmark on; he teases him and pokes at him, pointing out his age at every opportunity and making quips about him breaking his hip if he moves too quick, only laughing when Denmark threatens to break his head.

He makes jibes, but it doesn't make them move any faster.

Since leaving the plane, Peter has noticed things changing in Denmark. He no longer moves when he sleeps, lying instead in perfect stillness until morning when Peter has to shake him awake, a task that proves its self harder with each passing day. It always takes more than one try and he's always groggy when does finally wake. He'll spend several minutes just sitting with his hands in his lap, staring blankly ahead, blinking, like he is still caught between sleep and reality, his throat working steadily until he has to pull the mask down to spit blood into the dirt. It becomes a sick sort of ritual for them, these mornings. Peter wakes him up and sits beside him with a bottle of water, quiet while he waits for him to become self aware again, and rubs his back when he doubles over with coughs, his fingers resistant to touch the hard knobs of Denmark's spine.

He's also cold all the time, now. He keeps one of their blankets folded up and zipped into his coat against his chest while they walk and at night, his teeth chatter and he shivers through the covers as Peter hugs his waist and tries to share what little heat he has of his own. His bones stick out and he feels brittle under Peter's arms. He feels like he might break if he were to sneeze or cough just one more time, but, somehow, never does and just spends the hours curled into himself, trembling. On their fifth night of camping, his jittering teeth wake Canada and he insists that Denmark come sleep between he and America. He is quick to decline, but there is

something knowing in Matthew's empty eyes and Peter drags him to lie down beside the brothers.

They discover that night that America's whole body is a living, breathing furnace and they are both very embarrassed in the morning when they wake to find Denmark clinging to Alfred. He's well humiliated but can't deny that the collective warmth helps and they take to sleeping that way every night.

The biggest change, though, is in his stride.

When they first set out from Munich, he had limped every few steps. It seemed that there was something stuck to the bottom of his shoe or a lump in his sock, innocent enough, but now he has to drag his legs through each step, heavy and stiff and so careful that he may as well be traversing a path glass. Every kilometer becomes a huge effort. He denies that it's an issue, even as he keeps falling behind, but they can all see it for exactly what it is. Even Canada with his foggy eyes takes notice.

"You're struggling," he remarks on the seventh day. "Are you all right?"

"M'fine."

"You're not. It's easy to see that you're having difficulties."

Denmark snorts. "You're blind, how can you tell if I have a problem?"

"Denmark, I can hear your heart from here."

Denmark doesn't have anything to say to that.

When they finally pass the sign into city limits after nine days, there is a collective sigh of relief. With the amount of bickering and petty niggling that has trailed along with the trip, there isn't a single one of them who isn't looking forward to getting it over with, especially

Alfred, who is particularly starry-eyed when the dilapidated buildings come into view.

"Oh my God, we're here!" He exclaims. "Denmark, I take back what I said about you being a crappy navigator. We're here, we're here!" He laughs happily and hurries to push the cart through a web of overturned shipping containers. "We're going to sleep inside tonight and we're going to find everybody and it's going to be *awesome!* "

While he surges forward, Denmark and Peter take their time, as they have been for the whole trip.

"We can't stay in Leipzig for very long, huh?" Peter asks.

Denmark smiles and shakes his head. "We'll stay the night."

"Do you think we'll be able to find Arthur or Francis?"

"Probably not. But, if they're here, I guarantee you Alfred will find them and take them back to the States when Russia gets here." He squeezes Peter's hand. "You'll see them again. Don't worry."

Peter looks down at the ground. "Okay."

"Hey," he nudges him with his hip. "Don't look so sad. We're almost there. It's only about another six hundred kilometers to Slupsk."

"Really?"

"Really. We can be there in another week if we play it safe."

Peter's face breaks out in a grin. "And then we just have to find a boat."

"Yep. And as soon as we do, it's just a quick trip across the water to Sweden."

"And then…" he pauses, allowing the distance to sink in. "And then we made it."

"And the only thing left to do will be to find the others. After that, it's just a matter of waiting for our ride to show up." He waggles his eyebrows. "Are you excited?"

Peter doesn't bother to answer him and just drags him into the city as fast as their legs will carry them.

A/N: Denmark is hella pro at celebrating the Forth of July. For about the last ninety years, about fifteen or so thousand people gather on the hills at Rebild Bakker in north Jutland for a big celebration of Danish-American friendship. It's the biggest Forth of July party outside of the United States.

No updates for the next few days! It's my weekend, so I'm gonna go jump in the river until I shrivel up into a tiny prune. I'll see you this weekend!

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Finding a shelter to stay in for the night proves to be a more difficult task than they initially planned on. Most of the bunkers have doors that are above ground, heavy and made of bolted metal, all of them marked clear as day by a streak of yellow paint, and they are not hard to locate. Within minutes of entering the thick of the city, they find one. And another less than a kilometer away and another just down the street from that. They're everywhere, really. Finding them is not an issue in the least.

The problem is wide-swept paranoia.

Each door is sealed shut from the inside and it doesn't matter how long they bang and knock; no one is brave enough to open up for them. They try to explain themselves to each door. They try to tell of their journey from Frankfurt and of their exhaustion; try to appeal to anyone who will listen by telling them they have a child with them and a man too sick to walk anymore. America even offers to trade food for shelter, but his frustrated bargaining is met only by silence and gets lost in the drifting ash as Denmark yanks on the back of his collar and drags him to try the next one.

It isn't hard to understand *why* everyone is so scared to let them in. The streets are riddled with bullet ricochets and the greasy, black streaks left behind by squealing tires, many of them leading into the sides of broken buildings and back to the road again, the drivers having apparently caught whoever they had been chasing. The tracks in the dust are fresh too- still new enough that the ash has not yet had a chance to resettle completely, leaving them dark and obvious like a loud warning for all of them to see. And they do see it. They see it and understand it just fine. The people left above ground in Leipzig are being hunted. And the people lucky enough to have shelter aren't about to risk their safety to let in a group of strangers.

By the time they stop at their twelfth door, Peter is already preparing himself to spend another night in the woods.

"This isn't working," Canada sighs when Alfred parks the cart again. "What if the bunkers are empty? It's possible that these people could already be dead."

"Possible, but unlikely." Denmark sweeps his hand out over the city skyline. "This place is crawling with shelters. I can't imagine every single one is empty."

America looks nervously to the barren street behind them. "Well, we can't just keep knocking doors in all night. It's too creepy."

"I agree," Denmark says and bangs his fist against the door. "If they don't open up here, we'll head back the way we came and try again in the morning. It's too dangerous to stay in the open like this." He lets his hand drop and clears his throat. "Uh… hello? Kannst du… du mich hören?"

While Denmark stumbles his way through obviously rusty German, Peter takes a step back away from the bunker to stare into the city behind them. He can't quite put his finger on it, but something about the atmosphere here seems different than in the other cities they have stopped in. It's quieter, he thinks. There are signs of struggle and of a human presence, but for now, it feels like they are the only people in the entire city, small and alone and positioned just so that they may be swallowed up by the cracked pavement and broken windows at any moment. It's sinister, almost, how silent it is. He hasn't felt so uneasy in a big city since they first left and it makes him feel a bit like he waiting for the monster beneath his bed to appear. He kicks a small pebble into a gutter, just to break the smothering quiet, but the tiny clicks that echo off of the abandoned cars don't make him feel any less uncomfortable.

He swallows and turns back to Denmark, tugging on his jacket. "I don't think they're going to answer," he says. "I think we should go."

Denmark scowls. "Yeah, awesome. Walked all this way just to sleep in the dirt again." He turns around and kicks the door with his heel. "For the record, you're all dicks!" He yells into the door. He spins around, grumbling loudly in his own language, and Peter takes his hand and hurries after him.

Less than a few steps and a loud creak makes them all jump.

With a strained groan, the door behind them swings open and a young woman cautiously peers through the dark crack, a dirt streaked hand curled around the handle and a wary eye trained on them. She doesn't say a word or make any move to open the door wider, but at once, America's face breaks out in a huge grin and he strides forward to her.

"Hey, you opened it! Hi! We're-"

"Stop!" She snaps. "Go back to where you were!" Her voice is aggravated and thick with a heavy accent when she pushes the door open enough to step through.

Peter finds familiarity in the accent as soon as she speaks. He's gotten accustomed to one just like it over the past few months. He turns to look up at Denmark, whose hand has gone slack in his own, his eyes wide and shoulders stock still, disbelief painted over every tense feature that Peter can see.

The girl points at Denmark. "You," she says. "Were you the one talking?"

He nods.

"Put your gun down and come over here."

He starts to do just that but Alfred dashes forward to grab his arm.

"What are you doing?" He hisses. "It might be a trick!"

Denmark shakes him off. "Shut up. For one minute, just be quiet." He looks pleadingly at him. "Please."

They watch each other for a split second, one much more confused than the other, and America steps back, allowing Denmark to lay his rifle out on the pavement, straightening up with empty hands to show her. She nods and he makes his way to the door. He stops in front of her and she stares at him intently, her eyes boring into his as she steps completely out into the open, long, blonde braids tied behind her head, falling against a dirty sundress that swishes around skinned knees.

"Earlier," she says. "After you kicked the door, you said something. I didn't quite catch it."

"I said you were all a bunch of unhelpful assholes." He shrugs. "Maybe a few other things."

"But you didn't say it like that." Her eyes narrow. "You said it differently."

"That's right."

"You said it in a different language."

"I did."

"Who are you?" She asks after a moment. "I feel like I know you."

Denmark nods and pulls the mask down. "You do," he says, a slight waver to his voice.

"I don't recognize you."

"You wouldn't, but…" he smiles and reaches out and gently touches her shoulder. "I've known you your whole life."

The rest of them watch, a silent tension tying them together as Denmark takes another step forward toward the girl. Peter glances

sideways at Canada, who has his head tilted just slightly toward them. His eyes are closed and he is listening, trying to make out the rest of their softly spoken conversation, a knowing grin on his face, lips barely turned up like he has an inkling of what's happening. Alfred, on the other hand, just has the same shocked, perplexed expression on his face and leans down to rest his chin on Peter's shoulder.

"Hey," he whispers. "He knows her? Who is she?"

Peter swats him away. "Dummy, don't you get it?"

"Get what?"

Peter grins, watching Denmark pull the girl into a tight hug.

"She's Danish."

After a brief conversation that Peter can't follow, they are allowed entrance into the bunker. The girl, named Ida, leads them down a narrow flight of stairs into the space underground, much smaller than the one in Munich, and they are met by a row of twenty beds lined against the walls and a group of five very nervous looking people. They are all in various states of health, but each of them has plenty enough energy to be immediately distrustful of them when they stop at the base of the stairs.

"My family," Ida tells them. She steers them to a cluster of empty beds and sits them down. "Please wait for a minute while I talk to them." She pauses to grab Denmark's sleeve. "Except for you. You come with me."

While they go, Alfred lowers Matthew to the edge of the bed and lays him back, slipping in next to him and staring curiously into the corner of the bunker, an eyebrow going up when a soft conversation starts and the eldest woman in the group takes Denmark's hand and pulls him down to sit beside her.

"They sure seem happy to see each other," he muses quietly.

Canada smiles. "Can you blame them? For a place with such a small population to begin with, finding your countrymen amidst all this chaos must feel like finding treasure." He folds his hands in his lap and sighs fondly. "Plus, for him, it's finding a little piece of home, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Peter grins. He turns back and looks over his shoulder just in time to catch Denmark and Ida's mother exchanging a somber embrace. He isn't sure what they're talking about, but it doesn't take much imagination for him to assume they are offering condolences for a shared land now lost to the ocean. It's a bit sad, he thinks, that these people will never really know how important this moment truly is; that they will never know just whom it is that they have reunited with. They won't ever know the hope that it instills or the golden joy that it *really* brings beyond the simple familiarity of a common language and homeland. They will think they have found an old neighbor who they never really visited but have always known in the back of their own lives, a man they think they have spoken to a few times and borrowed a lawn mower from once or twice. They'll need to be reminded of his name, but when they hear it, they will think they've always known it. It's depressing, sure, but it still makes his heart clench up to watch, especially when he catches the watery smile on Denmark's face.

It's a sad expression, but it is so genuine that it still manages to light up the room.

He returns to the rest of them after a few minutes and eases himself down to sit next to Peter, pulling his scarf off and rubbing a hand down his face.

"They're from Favrskov," he says hoarsely. "They were here on a family vacation and were never able to make it home before the flashes hit." He slumps forward and lets his head hang between his knees. "I feel like I'm going to puke."

Peter's brow knits in concern and reaches out to touch his back. "Why? Are you okay?"

Denmark straightens up, inhaling slowly and blinking rapidly at the ceiling. "Yeah, I'm fine," he says after a moment. "Better than fine. I'm just so excited, the whole room is kind of spinning."

"Right, so!" America claps him on the shoulder. "They're gonna let us stay right?"

Matthew sighs and elbows him in the ribs. "Way to ruin the moment."

Denmark just shakes his head and runs his fingers through his hair. "I explained your situation to them. They said you can stay for as long as you have to as long as you have your own resources and don't bring anyone else in."

"Do they know that Al will be going in and out every day to try and find Francis and the others?"

"Yeah, and they said it's fine. You just have to be careful." He jerks his head in the direction of the door. "There's a group of people who come into the city every day looking for people above ground. The streets here are still in good enough condition that they can drive a truck around and they've been running people down and taking them with them. That's why they're the only ones left down here."

Peter's eyes widen. "What do they do with them?"

"Let's not get graphic." He sighs and lies back, dropping his arm over his eyes. "I almost don't want to leave," he mutters. "It's not safe for them here."

Matthew nods. "But it's safer here than it is out there. They've held out this long, I'm sure they can make it until Ivan gets here."

Denmark falls silent for a minute, seemingly lost in thought. He lets his arm slide down to his chest and turns his head to look at

America. "Alfred, I need you to do me a favor."

"Huh?"

"You're always looking for the chance to be a hero, right?"

He perks up immediately and leans forward, grinning. "I *am* a hero!"

Denmark laughs under his breath. "Right." He breaks his gaze with the other man and flits his eyes over to Ida and her family. The three youngest children are getting ready to sleep while Ida prepares their beds for them, chiding them and shooing them under the blankets. For a moment, he just watches them with an unreadable expression; something caught between affection and a lingering melancholy, his hand curling in to fist the front of his jacket.

"Alfred, I want you to be a hero for this family," he says finally. He turns back to face him. "Keep them safe until Ivan shows up and then get them out of here safely, okay?"

Alfred's face softens. "Yeah, of course," he smiles. "No problem. And Mattie can keep them company while I'm looking for everybody, right?"

Canada nods. "Sure thing."

Denmark sits up and holds his hand out. "Thank you," he says seriously. "For all I know, they might be the only ones left, so…"

America laughs loudly and claps their palms together, shaking fiercely. "Hey, don't worry about a thing, buddy! Consider it payback for walking us here. I mean, not that I wouldn't do it anyway, because that's what heroes do, but you know."

Denmark pulls out of Alfred's grip and turns to Peter. "I'm gonna talk to them for a while longer, but if you're tired, you can go to bed."

"I think I will," he nods. "You can wake me up if you get cold when you go to bed, though."

He smiles and gets to his feet. "Sleep good. I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

While he goes, Peter takes his time getting ready for bed. He unlaces his boots and sets them at the foot of his bed, watching Denmark from the corner of his eye as he sits down beside Ida's youngest brother and hands him the squeaky toy to play with, effectively keeping the boy entertained while he leans in to talk with the rest of them. As he lies on his side beneath the covers, just watching, Peter wishes on some level that he could understand what they were saying. He feels like he is missing out on some monumental turning point in their journey. It seems to him that he is studying a very old, sad man being reunited with his estranged children after months of walking the cusp between this life and the next; a pivotal event that he should be observing and learning from so that he may take it with him. Something he can use to prepare himself for the distant future when he might be in the same position himself.

He wants to know what it is that Ida's father says that makes them all laugh so hard or what the lyrics in her mother's lullaby mean as she tucks the younger children into bed. And he is dreadfully, dreadfully curious about what exactly prompts Ida to sit down in front of Denmark with her hair down for him to gently braid, a task his clumsy fingers only just manage to complete in two straight, lumpy rows behind her shoulders. It all has such an honest care to it that it kills him not knowing. Still, though, he is well aware of the bond that exists between a nation and their people. And he knows that this is one small blip in time that is not for him. It is something between Denmark and this family and understood or not, as he rolls over to give them their privacy, he is perfectly content to fall asleep to the sound of their soft laughter and light, incomprehensible conversation.

When he wakes up the next morning, he finds Denmark on his knees on the floor, slumped over the side of Ida's bed with the girl's hand held loosely in his own.

It kind of breaks his heart to wake him up.

Sunrise sees them to the top of the stairs, adjusting their coats against an unexpected wind and saying their goodbyes. Denmark has already made his peace with Ida and her family, but they still follow them to the surface for one last round of hugs and well-wishing, America waiting patiently to the side with Canada balanced on his back while Ida's father presses two bottles of water into Denmark's hands and tells him to take care of Peter.

"You're too young to know much about raising kids," he says sternly, much to the quiet amusement of the others. "But if you've really gone as far as you say, I think you'll be fine." He crouches down next to Peter. "And you keep an eye on your uncle, yeah? He seems to space out a lot."

Peter grins at Denmark's indignant spluttering and nods. "I will."

"Good." He stands back up and shakes Denmark's hand. "Good luck, Mathias. I hope that we'll meet again some day."

"I'll do my best." He nods in America's direction. "Stick with him and his brother and they'll get you to one of the North American colonies. That's where we'll be headed after we're done, so if there's a place to meet up, it'll be there."

"Sounds like a plan. We'll see you there, then." He smiles and the handshake turns into a hug from their entire family, all of them looping their arms around each other and pressing in, Denmark square in the middle and grinning like he is still the happiest country on Earth.

"Stay safe," he says when they part.

Ida smiles. She is holding the hands of her siblings and starting to draw them back inside against the cold. "You too," she says. "We'll see you in the United States."

One by one, they file back inside and Denmark waves to them all, watching them go with misty eyes and the same huge grin on his face. Once they've all disappeared back down the stairs, he sags slightly and yanks the mask up. He turns to face Alfred.

"The same goes for you guys," he snaps. "Try to lay low until Ivan gets here."

America laughs loudly. "Ah, c'mon! We'll be A-okay with me taking charge, right, Mattie?"

Canada doesn't need his eyes to see the deadpan skepticism on Denmark's face. "We'll be fine," he assures him. "He'll keep an eye on them and I'll keep an ear on him. You don't need to worry."

"Yeah, lighten up!" Alfred punches his shoulder hard enough that he stumbles back. "Oh, and hey, we have a present for you!" He grabs Denmark's sleeve and pulls him back before he can regain his composure himself and shoves a large, plastic can into his hands.

"It's about a liter of gasoline," Matthew explains. "Most of what you'll find on the ground is too damp to start a fire without it."

"We figured you could use it since you're so cold all the time now." Alfred grins and turns his nose up. "And since you won't have me to cling to like a little girl."

Denmark glowers at him. "Well, I *was* going to say thanks, but now I just kind of want to punch you in the teeth."

Canada smiles. "We'll miss you too."

America steps forward and drops a hand onto Peter's head, mussing his hair. "Take care, little man. We'll find Arthur for you and come

pick you guys up in a while."

"Um, if… if you find him, could you tell him that I tried to look for him?" Peter asks. "When I first woke up, anyway?"

"Sure. But you'll be able to tell him yourself because I'm totally going to find him."

He grins. "Okay."

Matthew waves a hand over Alfred's shoulder. "You should get going. It's going to be light out in a few minutes."

"Yeah, we need to get moving," Denmark hands the gas can to Peter and takes a step forward to shake Canada's hand. "I'll see you later."

Matthew smiles sadly. "No, you won't," he says, tapping his temple. "But we'll still be able to say hello."

Denmark swallows. "Right." He steps back enough to bump fists with Alfred before he turns and places a hand on Peter's shoulder, steering him back into the road. "Good luck."

"Bye, guys! Thanks for being my GPS!"

Denmark rolls his eyes and they leave to the sound of the bunker door echoing behind them.

On the fourth night out, it becomes abundantly clear that there is no possible way that they will be making it to Poland in a week.

Wind has followed them since their departure from Leipzig, bringing with it the stinging grit of loose ash and bits of debris as it kicks up dust and dirt between the trees and straight into whatever exposed skin it can find between their wraps and jackets. At first, it is only a trickle, a light breeze, but by the end of the second day, it evolves into a roaring storm, one that keeps the skies dark even during the

day. Barely able to see, they try to make due with walking just by feel. But the terrain is too uneven and too dangerous to fly blind and they are quick to run the batteries down on their flashlight and are left to try and wait it out beneath a freeway overpass by day five, barely fifty kilometers from where they started.

They use broken tree branches to dig a shallow trench under the groaning concrete. It's an arduous task given the near complete darkness and freezing gale, and by the time the hours pass and they have finished, Peter's hands are dotted with torn blisters and itchy, red scratches from the hard dirt and bits of rock that have blown into his gloves. It isn't even a very deep hole- only just big enough for Denmark to sit in with Peter in his lap and the blankets pulled over their heads to try and shield what the earth and bridge cannot- but his chest is heaving and his arms are shaking from exertion when they finally settle to let the time pass with the howling winds.

Flashes of lightning come to join the wind shortly after the sun actually goes down. Great bursts of white and purple are bright and strong and light up the inside of their sad little hovel like it is outnumbered and under heavy fire, which, in a way, they are. It's a bizarre thing to see after having spent so much time in a monochrome line of dead trees. He had nearly forgotten how vivid neon colors could be. He almost wishes he had the courage to sit on the bridge and watch the blinding cracks streak through the ash.

Almost.

"Just a few more hours," Denmark stammers through chattering teeth. "It'll only be a few hours."

They spend four days in the trench.

There isn't much more to do than wait. They have just enough space to share their meals, nothing more. They try to play games in the sketchbook, but Peter's hands are still too sore to hold the pen properly and Denmark's chest is too jittery and uneven to balance the pages on without awkwardly holding it in place and they soon

give up on games in favor of simply lying quietly, taking turns sleeping. Peter doesn't think there is anyone who would be stupid enough to be out looking for transients in this kind of weather, but Denmark still insists that they are too exposed and they sleep in shifts, one keeping watch while the other tries to rest.

When it finally passes, their blankets are black from the ash and it takes a struggle of ten minutes before Denmark can even stand up.

After their stint under the bridge, their pace slows to a dead crawl, even without the wind and cold. What had previously been sixty or so kilometers each day has dropped to twenty-five on a good day, maybe thirty if they stay on the highway, and continues to tick ever downward with each passing hour. It's become hard to ignore anymore, the way Denmark's legs seem to drag, so heavy and stiff in every step he forces himself to make, his boots scraping against the pavement or through the mud as he trudges forward, silent and rigid and still trying so hard to smile when Peter clutches to his coat sleeve and encourages him to keep going. And he encourages him often. He tries to remain positive; he reminds him that the sooner they get there, the sooner he can relax. He cuts breaks shortn under the pretense of losing daylight. He says Norway is going to scold him for showing up so late and that Sweden is going to kick his ass if he has to wait any longer and he tries and tries to put a nice spin on everything he says to keep Denmark moving.

Still, what's better left unspoken still hangs in the air and no amount of sugarcoating can blow it away.

He's shutting down.

Since leaving Leipzig two weeks ago, he's lost the ability to walk and talk at the same time. His lungs are too weak to manage enough breath for the two activities at once. It's become one or the other. When Peter speaks to fill the silence as they go, he learns to expect only nods and exaggerated hand motions, maybe a strained expression from behind his mask and goggles if they're walking

slowly enough, and after a while, he gives up on engaging conversation all together and settles for just retelling stories that Finland and Sweden once read to him as a treat before bed. He can never quite remember how the stories go, but despite his plot holes and improvising, the silly little fairytales seem to lift Denmark's spirits and he listens with rapt attention, even as he wheezes and drags along beside him.

It's after twenty days that he realizes that over half of the stories he's recalled are by Hans Christian Andersen and he wonders why Denmark never said anything.

What was supposed to only take a week takes a month and just over thirty days pass before they finally, finally, make their way through Forst and bridge the border between Germany and Poland. He doesn't even notice it until they stop for a break and Denmark congratulates him on having made it so far. Nothing in Poland seems much different than what he has already seen in Germany. The skies are still gray, the trees are still charred, and landscape is still a mess. The only real difference he can notice is after another day of walking, when the pavement begins to smooth out and he doesn't have to step over huge cracks anymore. The roads are still in decent condition. Nothing to take a bicycle or a sedan over, but manageable with four-wheel drive. He almost suggests that they try hotwiring a truck to go the rest of the way, but there are surprisingly few vehicles left on the highway. And the only ones left are far too damaged to consider driving.

Another week of walking yields no more plentiful options, either. Everything they find on the road is scrap and melted metal. Absolutely nothing of use.

"Everything is so empty," Peter muses one night. They've stopped in Ulim to make camp, unrolling their blankets beneath the collapsed roof of an old bus terminal. "There aren't even any bones in any of the cars." He rolls over to face Denmark. "It's like everything's been cleaned up."

Denmark only shrugs and continues to massage his knees.

They have their first bit of human interaction after another week and a half, just outside of Sławsko.

They're in the home stretch, so close that they can smell the sea, and completely out of food. Stopping to search through grocery stores and gas stations has proven to be worthless; everything has been picked clean, right down to the grime underneath shelves and the glue behind can labels. They try their best to scavenge. They root through overturned dumpsters and through the trunks of dented cars, but they find nothing more than a box of stale cereal that barely lasts them a day.

When they stop for a rest in a public restroom on the outskirts of town, all they have left is the single beer and can of pineapple.

"We can save it," Peter insists. "We don't have much further to go right? It'll be okay."

Denmark sighs, the can of fruit held loosely in his palm. "I dunno, Peter. That's a long time to wait and you're already too skinny."

"You said I could do whatever I want with it, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I want to try to save it." He pauses briefly, searching the worry lines on Denmark's face. "If we can't find anything tomorrow, we can have it then. How about that?"

"Deal."

"Good." Peter stretches his arms above his head. "We should get going again. It's going to be dark soon."

Denmark nods and starts to get up, but before he can manage the agonizing process of getting to his feet, the door slams open and knocks him flat on his back, toppling into Peter and sending them both crashing to the floor. They have a split second to recover, but it's nowhere near enough and Peter feels the boot against his chest before he sees it come down on his sternum, followed immediately by the end of an immaculately shined shotgun barrel.

"Don't even *think* about moving."

A flash of teeth and the boot heel sinks into his coat.

"And ew, put those groody little hands of yours behind you."

A/N: Ida- it's a rather common Danish name for girls.

Denmark's stilted German- Denmark shares a land border with Germany and it is not uncommon for Dane's to know a smattering of German. It's a bit like people learning Spanish in the United States, I guess?

Sorry if this chapter was kind of WARRRGLRBRLL. I've kind of been awake for a really, really long time. ;A;

See you all (maybe) tomorrow!

# of 20

This is the end of the line, Peter thinks.

They have made it so far. Right through Germany and into Poland, right through the thick of it all, and this is it. They've been chased, they've been starving, they've been held hostage, and *this* is how they are going to die. So much hard work and they're going to get their heads blown apart on a dirty bathroom floor in a country he's never even been to before. Blown straight to pieces by an overly clean shotgun gripped by too-clean hands. Hands with fingers with chipped, pink nail polish and fingerless, leather gloves. They seem like nice gloves. Expensive, maybe. They're dirty but for some reason, through his terrified paralysis, he can see every little stippled dot in the grain and he wonders why that is. He doesn't want to look at the hands but he can't move, he's so terrified. Hands, pink, gloves. A shotgun. There is a shotgun pointed at his face.

A flurry of movement and Denmark is between him and the gun, shouting something while their attacker laughs. He can't hear a thing, though. He feels like his ears are full of cotton and their words are just muffled garbles of ups and downs and high pitched giggling. Giggling. They are going to die to the sound of someone laughing. That doesn't seem fair at all. Not when they are angled in just such a way that Denmark is going to take the first hit and splatter Peter with pieces of himself before the next shot comes right at him. Maybe through him. Maybe not.

There is another sound, one that he doesn't recognize. A breathy, stilted sort of noise, almost like a great sigh. It sounds like crying. Who here is crying? It doesn't sound like Denmark- he was quieter. And it would be silly for this pink, gloved stranger to be crying, so it must be coming from him.

Ah.

He's crying.

There is a slow shift of gravity and a moment later, everything is dark and tilting and he only cries harder. He can't see and he can't move and everything is dark and *oh God, he's dead.* He has to be. He's dead, Denmark is dead, they're dead and this is all that's left. This pitch black, warm, rocking nothingness.

"Peter…"

Dead, dead, dead. Everyone is dead.

"Peter."

He has to be dead. He has to be dead because he certainly isn't breathing.

"Peter!"

Something clamps around his face and he jolts backwards, right back into the dim light of the bathroom and it's hands, he realizes, that have his head locked in place, forcing his eyes up to focus on a dirty mop of blonde hair and two extremely serious eyes. Denmark. He's in Denmark's lap and clinging to his coat with no recollection of getting there.

"Peter, *breathe.* "

Denmark's fingers run through his hair and he does. The air burns.

"There you go. It's okay, you're okay."

No, no, he isn't, but his chest is still heaving too hard to tell him that.

He feels Denmark's legs shift beneath him and he guides him down to rest against his shoulder, his head tucked into the large lapels of his jacket and back into the same darkness as before as arms wrap around him and a cheek is pressed to the top of his head,

incomprehensible whispering working through the static in his ears and slow, gentle motions rocking him back and forth.

"I've got you. Shh, it's okay, I've got you."

Peter's eyes are burning and he wonders if they are open or not.

He can feel Denmark's arms tense around him and that inappropriate laughter from before returns, echoing off of the grime soaked bathroom walls and bouncing around in his head, looped like a song that the radio won't stop playing. He wants desperately to pull away. Every instinct he has is telling him to run but Denmark is holding him too tight to squirm away and he just has to wait and sit in this room full of hoarse giggles.

There is more warped sound and Denmark's head snaps away.

"Feliks, what the *fuck?* "

One last bark of laughter and Peter's brain flips off.

He wakes up to light slaps on his cheek and Denmark's worried face directly above him, mask pulled down around his neck and his bottom lip clamped firmly between his teeth. He blinks once. Twice. Three times and Denmark sits back and scrubs a hand down his face before leaning down and scooping him up, pulling him upright and leaning him against his chest, quiet while Peter tries to get a grasp on himself again. An obnoxious, obvious part of himself wants to ask if they are still alive and it's a hard urge to resist, but he figures if they are still in this gray, little bathroom, they definitely aren't in a better place and thus, must still be breathing at least a little bit. He curls his fingers into the front of Denmark's jacket and swallows nervously.

"What happened?" He croaks. It's just as stupid of a question, he is well aware, but the look on Denmark's face tells him that if he didn't say something soon, he might explode into a million pieces.

"You fainted."

Denmark's hand brushes across his cheek and it takes a moment for him to register that he isn't wearing his gloves.

"I did?"

"Yeah." He leans him up a little straighter. "Can't say I blame you. I just about pissed myself."

"Are we okay?"

"Yeah." He leans down and Peter can feel him exhale slowly into his hair. "We're okay."

Peter struggles to sit up on his own. He feels dizzy. "Who was that?"

Denmark's face takes on an annoyed hue. "Exactly who we were looking for."

"Poland?"

"Mm." He tucks a rogue collection of stray hairs behind Peter's ear. "I made him wait outside."

His eyes widen. "W-well, come on, we have to go then!" He tries to squirm his way to his feet, but before he can even get his boots under him, the cracked, tile walls spin and he drops right back down into Denmark's arms.

"Easy, easy," Denmark loops an arm under his knees and hauls him up. "Don't get up yet. You're gonna make yourself sick."

Peter isn't sure he could be sick even if he tried. It's been days since he's had anything to eat; there couldn't possibly be anything to throw up.

Denmark guides Peter's arms up to wrap around his neck and he carefully starts for the door, nudging it open with his hip, and Peter

has to squint against the cold of the outdoors. Poland is waiting for them just beside the door, leaning against a broken sign with a little blue arrow on it, pointing to the bathroom stalls.

"Took you long enough," he smirks.

Denmark glowers at him. "Yeah, well, you just about scared him to death. What the hell was that all about?"

Poland shrugs and Peter wonders where on Earth he finds the time to still paint his nails. "You guys are totally encroaching on my territory." He looks up and there is a certain degree of feral amusement in his smile. "I don't like people just wandering in. Especially without wiping their feet."

Denmark brushes past him and goes to sit against the wall, drawing the mask up over his nose again while Peter settles himself. "And I don't like crazy shitheads pointing guns at my nephew, so I guess we're even."

"Ugh, I see *you* haven't changed."

"Neither have you."

Peter just continues trying to breathe.

"So," Poland says after a moment and pushes away from the sign. "Fancy meeting you here, right? You guys are totally obvious, by the way. I've been following you for like, two days."

Denmark stares at him. "Are you didn't think to maybe come say hi?"

Feliks snorts. "Hey, don't get mad at me. You coulda been crazy like everybody else who comes prancing over my border. I'm not just gonna come invite you in unless I know what you're doing. Geez." He crosses his arms in front of himself. "What *are* you doing, anyway? Shouldn't you be like… in Denmark or whatever?"

"Yeah, I *should* , but I'm not, am I?"

Poland purses his lips. "Ugh, don't be so annoying. I have stuff to do." He waves a dismissive hand and starts to turn away. "Good luck, see you later, blah, blah, blah."

"Wait…!" Denmark lurches forward and Peter can almost feel the smug grin that Poland turns on them.

"Yes?"

"We… we heard someone was running a boat in the Baltic Sea."

"And?"

"Is it you?"

"Who's asking?"

Denmark's sigh is nothing but frustration. "I am."

He shrugs and rolls his eyes up to look somewhere away from them. "I might be," he says, a little too nonchalantly for Peter's liking. "I might have a boat and I might have a little port that I keep it in."

"Feliks, please, we're kind of in a hurry. Do you have a boat or not?"

"Yuck, you're no fun, you know that?" He plants his hands on his hips and stares down at them, smirking. "Yeah, I've got a boat. It's a totally awesome boat and it goes wicked fast. Well, okay, not *that* fast, but definitely faster than trying to paddle. You looking for a ride?"

Denmark nods.

"Where to?"

"Sweden. Malmö."

A raised eyebrow. "Are you stupid or what? Malmö is totally gone."

"What?"

"Yep, yep." He twirls a finger in the air. "Completely under water. Come to think of it, you're pretty much gone too."

Denmark grits his teeth. "I'm aware."

"Snippy, snippy, geeze. I was only making an observation," he huffs. "Anyway, you don't want to go to Sweden. That whole area is a hot mess. If you want to settle down somewhere, go back to Germany and find a bunker or something."

"We aren't going to stay there," Peter cuts in quietly. "We're just going to take a look and wait for Russia and America to come get us."

"Huh? Russia?" He makes a face. "He's still kicking?"

"He has a submarine. He's coming this way in about a week and he's going to take people back to the US." Peter looks down and wrings his hands. "We're just trying to find everyone before he gets here."

Poland sighs and flops back against the sign again. "Okaaay, fine," he draws after a moment. "I can take you to Stockholm." He points at them before they can get too excited. "But it's going to cost you."

Denmark tenses. "Come again?"

"What, you think I do this for free?"

A pause.

Poland bursts out laughing. "Oh my gosh, you're totally out of your mind, aren't you? Do you know how dangerous it is taking a boat out these days? The ocean is a total monster now." His laugh dies down to a wide grin. "And it's not like I can just get the things I need out of thin air. It's tough work keeping everything together, you know. I gotta keep in top condition."

"Are you serious?" Denmark blinks disbelievingly at him. "Even though it's us, you still want something?"

"Um, did I stutter?"

Denmark's head makes a dull clonk when it tips back against the wall. "What do you want, exactly?"

He shrugs. "Food, water, the essentials. Money, if you've got it." He rolls his eyes. "For some reason, people are still stupid enough to think it has like any kind of worth, so they still take it at the outposts."

Peter swallows. He's beginning to feel sick again. "We have a can of pineapple," he says. "That's all."

Poland stares at him. "That's cute, but you're gonna have to do better than that. Maybe if you had like, five cans of it, then we could talk, but no."

Denmark heaves a sigh and sits up. "Is there a trading post anywhere near here that we could go to and try to find something?"

"I thought you said you didn't have anything? How are you going to trade nothing for something?"

"We have blankets and some petrol."

Poland ponders this for a moment and nods. "Yeah, okay, you might be able to get something worth my while with that." He waves at them to get up. "Okay, come on, come with me. There's a post about three kilometers from where I've got my boat. It's kind of a stupid, tiny one, but if you're not a complete thick-head, you can find some good stuff."

Denmark gets to his feet and slowly eases Peter up as well, keeping a hand on his arm as he guides him back to solid ground again. "You okay? I can carry you if you want."

Peter shakes his head. "I'm okay."

He nods and takes his hand, giving it a firm squeeze, looking up to Poland and starting back toward the road. "It's not that far, right? We can make it tonight if we hurry."

Poland doesn't follow them. "Um, what do you think you're doing?"

Denmark pauses and turns back around. "Leaving?"

Feliks wrinkles his nose and shakes his head, exasperated. "Oh my God, you guys are totally ridiculous. I am *not* walking that far."

"Then how do you expect us to get there?"

"Um, Earth to Captain Brainiac, have you seen my roads?" He draws his hand out of his pocket, twirling a key ring on one finger.

Denmark gapes at him. "You have a car?"

"Ugh, you really are deaf." He shakes his head and waves at them to follow him. "I'm on the other side of the road, come on."

Peter exchanges a confused look with Denmark, who only shrugs and pulls him to follow after the humming blonde.

Poland's car turns out to be a small, white pick-up truck with a huge, metal grate bolted to the front. It's splattered with mud and, really, isn't much to look at, but Peter is pretty sure it could plow through about anything if it really had the motivation to do so. Feliks opens the door to the cab and shoos them inside. It's fairly cramped, but the seat is wrapped in smooth leather and it's softer than anything Peter has had the privilege of leaning against in over a year.

"Okay, first rule, don't touch anything," Feliks snaps, turning the key and letting the engine rumble to life. "I just got it how I like it."

Denmark raises a curious eyebrow. "There's nothing in here."

"Exactly." He cranks the truck into first gear and pulls them back onto the road, jostling them when the tires hit the uneven pavement. "I just got all the mud out of here, so don't track any of your grossness all over the seats, got it?"

"Got it." He leans down, bent at the waist with an arm stretched out beneath the dash, feeling around for their bag. "How do you keep gas in this?"

Poland shrugs. "It's pretty easy. Lots of the abandoned cars had full tanks and it's not like I'm going that far."

Peter frowns and carefully nudges the bag with his foot until Denmark's fingers brush against it and wrap around the strap. Denmark pulls it up and into his lap, fumbling to unclasp it and rummaging around until he finds their map. He unfolds it, careful not to rip the creases, and spreads it out over his legs, his finger tracing the thick, black line that they've drawn from Leipzig to their current position. He glances over at Peter.

"How much further is it to Slupsk?"

"Huh?"

He nods at the map. "How much further?"

"Can't you tell?"

A pause.

"'Course I can tell. I'm just testing you to make sure you know."

Peter swallows. "About fifteen kilometers."

"Good." He reaches over to ruffle his hair. "We'll be there in no time."

Poland scoffs. "Yeah, maybe if you can get your brain to work long enough to get something to pay me with."

Denmark rolls his eyes and stuffs the map back away.

Poland doesn't bother much for pleasantries when they stop just outside a muddy collection of tents at the edge of a waterlogged forest. He points to a path leading into the trees, tells them to meet him at the dock, which he marks on their map, in two hours, and kicks them out of the truck.

Denmark is not amused. "You're not going to wait for us?" He asks flatly.

"Um, no? C'mon, it's three kilometers from point A to point B, I know you aren't *that* lazy." He leans out of the window, grinning over the idling engine. "Besides, I need to get the boat ready. You can't just throw it out into the water anymore."

Peter frowns and looks between Denmark and Poland. "What if no one will trade us for anything?"

Poland laughs. "You'll figure something out." He winks at Denmark. "Right?"

Denmark gives him a sour look. "Right."

"Good!" He pulls himself back into the cab and starts to roll up the window. "Remember, two hours! If you aren't there, I'm going home. I don't have time to wait around, so don't drag your feet." He waves to them as the truck trundles back onto the pavement and roars off into the ash.

For a moment, they stand in silence, looking down the road.

"I don't know if I like Poland," Peter says. "He's kind of… eccentric."

Denmark shakes his head and pulls him toward the path. "Come on," he says. "Let's just do this and get out of here. If we can get in and out, we can be to Stockholm by nightfall."

Peter nods and hurries after him. "Um, I have a question."

"Mm?"

"What *are* we going to do if no one will trade us anything?"

Denmark looks down and the corners of his eyes crinkle. "I have a back-up plan. You don't need to worry."

"Okay."

But Peter does worry. Especially when they set foot into the tent city and are met by dozens of people who just turn and stare at them, gazes set somewhere between sharply suspicious and ravenous. Unlike previous posts, this one doesn't seem to have any order whatsoever; just a big circle of tents and tarps and items set right out on the muddy ground in great piles beside their equally dirt flecked owners. None of them seem to be in good health. Everyone is covered in blisters and open wounds and all Peter can hear over his boots squelching is coughing. It seems that every other stall is manned by someone with white eyes.

But even the blind people follow the sound of their footsteps.

They have no luck at the first few stops they make. Denmark tries to offer their blankets and gasoline for a shopping basket full of unlabeled cans and again for two liters of water when his first attempt fails. No one seems to want what they have and they certainly don't seem like they want to talk to them either. Not a single word is spoken to them outside of "no" and Peter's worry begins to grow as they approach the last of the stalls after nearly an hour of haggling with uncooperative locals. The very last tent belongs to an old woman and she watches them approach from her place in the mud, a sad sort of look on her face when she catches sight of Peter. It gives him a bit of misplaced hope. He thinks that if they play up the fact that he is a child, she might take enough pity on them to make a trade.

They never do make it that far.

A group of men stops them just a few steps away from her. Out of everyone at the camp, they seem to be in fair enough condition, tall and still with enough brawn that it doesn't take more than a lifted hand to stop Denmark in his tracks. The tallest man, a young looking brunette, steps forward and stares down at them both, scowling, and jerks his head backward.

"You're looking to trade?" He asks. His voice if gruff, full of gravel and an accent so thick, Peter can barely understand him.

Denmark nods. "We are."

"What do you need?"

"Food and water," Denmark glances at the rest of the men. "We're trying to get passage on the boat in Slupsk."

The sixth man to the left laughs. "The ferrymen will take you for everything you've got."

Denmark shrugs. "It's still worth a shot."

Their leader nods. "We have food. Water, too. We'll trade you."

Denmark raises an eyebrow and his hand tightens around Peter's. "We have blankets and a liter of gasoline."

"We don't want your gas."

"What do you want then?"

The man takes a step forward. "How much you want for the kid?"

At once, Denmark pulls Peter back and stands in front of him, his grip nearly crushing by now. "He's not for sale."

"You can have everything we have," the man grins. His teeth are yellow. "Just let us have him."

"Absolutely not."

He takes another step. "He looks nothing like you. He isn't your son."

Denmark's back bumps into Peter when he matches the man with another step backward. "Doesn't matter."

The man frowns, so deep it leaves creases in his forehead, and he makes a grab for Peter, darting around Denmark and swiping at his coat. Denmark catches his wrist before he can get too close and wrenches it back, bones creaking, twisting hard until he has the man on his knees, teeth bared and eyes wide.

"I told you," he grits out. "No." He squeezes his fingers and Peter can see the man's palm bending in a way that he knows is completely wrong. "And if you try to touch him again, I will fucking kill you." He leans down and locks cold eyes with livid. "Do you understand me?"

The man spits on Denmark's face. "Big talk for a man who cannot see."

Denmark doesn't wipe his cheek clean. "I said," he bends the man's wrist further. "Do you understand me?"

"Fine."

Denmark stares at him for a moment longer and releases him, the man floundering to catch himself before he can fall into the mud. The others move in to help him to his feet, but he swings wildly at them, still staring furiously at Denmark through his dark, greasy hair.

"Come on," Denmark squeezes Peter's hand and pulls him along to the edge of the tents. "We're leaving."

Peter struggles to get his hammering heart under control and stumbles after him. "B-but we didn't-"

"I told you. I have a back up."

They make it as far as the street when there is a loud crack from behind them and something hot whistles past Peter's ear and buries its self in the pavement several meters away. It explodes when it hits and sends a flurry of ash up around their feet and it takes a single, stunned second for Peter to realize what's just happened. There is a second shot. This one rips through the air and smashes into the side of an overturned car and is immediately followed by a roar of angry voices coming from the woods behind them, dozens of boots sinking into the mud and breaking branches as a storm begins to build. A third shot and Denmark yanks him forward and begins to tear down the street.

"Don't look behind you!" He shouts.

Another crack and Peter shrieks, ducking his head and twisting just in time to see the very first trickle of a flood of people burst through the woods and begin after them, a man waving a rifle above his head, pointing after them and shouting to the others, gesturing to them.

A mob blasts out of the trees.

It's the entire camp. Even the woman with the sad eyes.

The entire camp.

And they all have guns.

All he and Denmark have is a head start.

Denmark hauls him off of the road and into the ditch, straight into the heavily wooded area that lines the muddy back road, and begins to drag him between stumps and broken logs, the wet bark flinging up

in hot splinters when the bullets begin to follow them. They keep landing so close. They weave and they weave, but Peter can smell gun powder and burning wood and everything is just so *close.* The shots don't hit, but the wood and dirt does, bouncing against his goggles and his cheeks and embeddig the skin around his nose with tiny bits of rock and earth. Too close. He can't see them, only hears them; it's a choked cluster of too many voices yelling too loudly to be understood, but he knows what they want.

He knows exactly what they want.

His legs feel like they are on fire. He hasn't had to run like this in weeks. He's barely had to walk given how slow their pace has been and the sudden change makes his knees want to lock up. No food and no water and he's weak. There is no possible way he is going to be able to run like this. Not when it's this fast. Not when he is this small.

"Three kilometers…!" He can barely hear Denmark wheeze. "Keep going!"

Peter looks down, just enough to see how hard Denmark's legs are shaking as they run.

Three kilometers.

Less than that.

Three kilometers, a boat, and they're home free.

"First rule of the end of the world: only strain yourself when you have to."

If Denmark can do it, so can he.

And he does. He pumps his legs and steels his feet and he runs as fast as he can carry himself, dodging through the trees and leaping over logs, the leaves exploding around them when bullets whiz to

their heels and chase them through the wet forest like angry dogs. The footsteps are fading, but the voices still carry, enough that Peter can tell they've only put the smallest amount of distance between each other.

They rush through the trees with just under a kilometer left and Peter can see the ocean. It smells different and it's grayer than he remembers, but it's there, yawning out in front of them over land it never should have touched.

One kilometer.

Half a kilometer.

Beside him, Denmark grunts and stumbles, but catches himself and surges forward, free arm wrapped around himself and eyes wider than Peter has ever seen them. From here they can see the dock. It's a narrow little thing, barely a few planks of wood that lead into the hungry water, and rests beside a boat that bobs silently in the rolling waves, a small red and white flag beckoning them closer with teasing little flaps in the salty breeze. It's so strange to see the water this far in, but he has no time to dwell on it and he yelps when Denmark yanks him down and pulls him down a sodden ravine, mud splattering up against the front of his coat and bringing wet gravel bouncing off of his shins. The dirt, the trees, the wind, everything here smells like the sea.

In a sick sense, it reminds him of home.

He can see Feliks now, wide-eyed and waiting for them at the edge of the dock, crouched down with his hands over his head. He's obviously well aware of the gunfire. Denmark shouts something that Peter can't quite hear over the blood thrumming through his ears and when his boots hit the wood, he could collapse with relief.

But he can't.

Because the relief lasts for less than a second.

"What the fuck is *this?* " Denmark yells.

It's the boat. And it is a boat, made of solid wood, painted white and rocking gently in the water with a small compass glued to the bow and a motor strapped to the back. It has an anchor and it has paddles and it has everything a boat should have.

It's tiny.

Barely bigger than an inflatable raft.

Two seats.

Denmark's arms slam around Peter's neck and he forces him down, ducking when another bullet flies past and into the water. "Feliks!" He cries. "What is this?"

"I-I'm sorry!" Poland scrambles to pull the boat closer to the dock. "I can only take one at a time! It'll sink with three people!"

Peters eyes widen and he swears he can feel his heart plummet into his stomach. "W-what?"

Another roar of gunfire and a corner of the dock breaks into splinters. Poland screams and jumps into the first seat, throwing an arm up across his face. From above him, Peter can feel Denmark tense, his chest heaving and rattling and his hand clenching around the back of Peter's jacket. The mob of voices is getting closer. They aren't out of the woods yet, but their shouts and getting clearer and the sound of breaking branches is beginning to overwhelm to lapping of waves against the boat. They'll be here soon. All of them will be here in less than a minute with their guns and their ropes and they are going to die next to the ocean.

Denmark's arms are suddenly around him. Gravity shifts and he's barely aware that he's moving until the boat is under him and Denmark is dropping him into the seat, rough hands guiding him to

sit against the side and stuffing their backpack into lap. He leans over him and grabs the front of Poland's coat.

"Take him to Stockholm!" He yells. "You take him straight there and you don't leave until you are fucking *sure* he is on safe ground, got it?"

"N-no!" Peter struggles to stand up again and the boat tips dangerously. "No, you can't…!"

Denmark pushes down on his shoulder and forces him to sit back down.

"I told you, it's not-" Poland shrieks when two shots come straight into the water beside the boat.

Denmark growls and hauls him forward. "You said money is okay, right?" He rummages in his pocket for a moment and shoves something into the smaller blonde's hands. "That's worth a one way trip and then some, don't even try to tell me it's not!" He shifts backward, ignoring Poland's sputtering, and grabs hold of Peter's arms, trying to keep him still. "Peter-"

"No! No, you can't stay here!" He cries. His whole face feels hot and the most awful, sick, squirming has settled into the pit of his stomach as he watches Denmark rip the mask off. "Please, you have to come with us!"

Denmark shakes his head and snaps the mask around Peter's ears. "I promised you, didn't I?" He smiles and there is blood between his teeth. "I told you, I'll swim if I have to." He stuffs his rifle into Peter's hands and grabs his face between his hands, forcing him to look directly at him. "Listen to me, Peter. You get there and you *find* them, all right? You know your way around Stockholm just as well as I do and I know you can do it. Don't talk to anyone, don't let anyone touch you, and I'll meet you on the other side, okay?" He pulls him forward in one quick, rough motion and kisses his forehead. "I'm right behind you."

Peter drops the rifle to the bottom of the boat and grips the front of Denmark's coat, his eyes spilling over so thick that he can hardly see. "No, no, no, no! Denmark, please!" He sobs and throws his arms around his neck. "I-I can't do it without you! You have to come, please!"

Another shot and a man bursts forth from the woods.

Denmark twists his head around. "Peter, let go, you have to go right now." He tries to push him off.

"No!"

"Peter, let go."

"Please!"

There are hands at his back and he is forcibly ripped away from Denmark and down into the boat. Poland releases him just long enough to start the motor and the water around them begins to foam just as Denmark's boot hits the side and knocks them away from the dock.

"No!" Peter screams and tries to lunge forward. One more last, ditch effort to touch him; to try and drag him along with them. "Denmark, no! *Denmark!* "

Denmark stands at the edge of the little pier, watching the boat pull away. He cups his hands around his mouth. "Find them!" He yells. "I'll see you in a few days, kiddo! I promise!" His voice cracks and he waves frantically. "I love you, Peter! Stay safe, okay?"

Peter can't even bring himself to say anything back. He's gripping the edge of the boat, so tight his fingers feel like they may break, and his eyes are wide and stricken as the dock gets smaller and smaller and Denmark turns away from them, toward the incoming mob, grabbing the gas can off of the ground before the tears off back into the woods, disappearing into the trees. For a moment, all Peter can

hear is the sound of the motor cutting through the water and Feliks panting; a strange, noisy kind of silence.

Gunfire.

Quiet.

His breath catches in his throat for a split second, not even time to exhale, and there is a huge explosion from the shore, loud and thick, and fire races through the trees, sending an enormous funnel of pitch black smoke into the sky right as the dock vanishes into the horizon. It washes over the water in a rush and Peter can smell gasoline and burning leaves.

Poland's truck, he realizes.

He blew up Poland's truck.

He screams. He screams Denmark's name over and over again, his eyes locked with the billowing ash, and he can't even hear himself anymore. He knows there are words coming out of his mouth and he knows he is shrieking, but his mind is completely white. He can't feel the boat beneath him or the mask around his face. It may as well not be there at all because all he can see is the smoke and mud and callused hands and bloody teeth and *Denmark is gone.*

"W-we have to go back!" He chokes. "Please, we can't just leave him!"

He twists around to face Feliks, mouth opening to plead and bargain, but the words die on his tongue when he sees him seated behind him. He has one hand on the motor and the other held in front of himself. In his palm, he has Denmark's payment for passage. It's small and golden and Peter had nearly forgotten he had it at all.

Norway's hairpin.

He lurches sideways and throws up into the ocean.

A/N: Put your helmets on kids. Shit just got real.

# of 20

They don't speak to each other. Poland is focused on steering through the rolling waves, the boat cutting through the water as he guides it around jagged pieces of debris while Peter is just trying to remember how to breathe again. He knows that he is in the boat. He can feel the wood clenched in his hands and he smell the mildew that has collected beneath the small seats, but he feels as if his is hovering above the little craft. He can't feel his legs or his feet. Or his arms. Or his head, for that matter. Every sense is lost to him, detached, and the only thing he is consciously aware of is the fact that he is in the middle of the ocean and Denmark is not with him. He is with Poland, a sarcastic stranger with suspicious eyes and a tense expression on his face, not the warm figure full of stories and encouragement that he has found comfort in through the last several months.

He is with Poland.

He is not with Denmark.

Denmark is on land.

Alone.

He isn't even sure how long they have been going for, but he knows he hasn't been able to stop crying even once. His eyes hurt, exhausted with the effort of so many tears, but, somehow, they just keep coming in bursts of wet heat that make his shoulders shake and his stomach hurt. He doesn't look at the water or at Poland; just clutches the backpack to his chest and buries his face in the rough canvas, sobbing into fabric that still smells like the back of Denmark's jacket. He doesn't want to touch the rifle or the mask around his neck. Those don't belong to him. Those belong to Denmark, but the backpack belongs to them both and he clings to it like it's the last link that it truly is.

Hours pass (or perhaps it is only minutes, Peter doesn't know) before Poland finally speaks to him, a hand placed awkwardly on his trembling arm when the water is calm enough to let the boat surge forward without attendance.

"Um," a pause. He sounds unsure of himself. "You're not hurt, right?"

Peter seems to have forgotten how to turn his thoughts into words. He tries to formulate a response, a simple 'no', but it doesn't make it past the churning cold in his belly and gets lost somewhere between the painful thud of his heart and the breath that he can't get back. And that's just fine, he thinks. He doesn't have anything to say to Feliks. Nothing good, anyway.

Poland sighs and his hand moves back to the motor. Another long stretch of silence, broken only by Peter's muffled crying, falls into the boat and stays there for a good while.

"I'm sorry," he says finally. "Y'know… about Denmark."

Peter doesn't want to hear it.

"You guys were close?"

He doesn't even try.

A pause. "He was a good man."

Peter's head snaps up so fast that his goggles slip down his face. "*Is!* " He cries and clutches the backpack tighter. "He *is* a good man! Not *was!* " Once more, the coil of frozen tension in his stomach lurches and he feels like he is going to be sick again. His fingers go lax, just enough that the pack starts to slide, and tears spill over his cheeks into the cold, salty ocean air. "He promised…" he chokes. "H-he said he'll meet us there."

Feliks makes a strangled sort of noise and he nods. "Right. Sorry."

"This is…" Peter sniffs and curls his hands into fists around the straps of the backpack. "This is all your fault."

"It's not-"

"Yes it is!" He whirls around to face him. "You never told us the boat only had two seats and you just left us at that trading post!"

Poland scowls and turns around to glare at the surface of the water. "I didn't count on you guys picking a fight with the people there, okay?"

"What about the boat? If you could only take one of us, you should have said something!"

"I'm just trying to scrape out a living, all right?" Feliks snaps. "I thought that one of you would camp and then I would just make two trips or something. None of this was supposed to happen." He rips off his gloves and scrubs his hands down his face, a frustrated groan working through his fingers. "Everything was supposed to be fine."

Peter has nothing to say to that. He's had enough of the best-laid plans of mice and men.

After a few more minutes of tense silence, Poland pulls his coat tighter and sighs. "You're looking for Sweden and everybody, right?"

Peter nods.

"Well, they aren't gonna be in Stockholm, then. I wasn't kidding when I said it was a mess over there, you know. Anywhere on the coast is pretty much under water, so most of what you're gonna find in Stockholm is the tops of buildings and a lot of junk floating in the water."

Peter squeezes his eyes shut. "Then where am I supposed to go?"

Another long, heavy sigh. "There are a few places he might be, but if I were you, I'd check Växjö. I haven't been there yet, but I've heard

from a few people that the city is still in decent shape and that there's like, a huge network of shelters right in the middle. Plus, there was a boat that dropped a few people off outside of Koszalin a few months ago and the people who got off said that's where the crew was heading back to." He shrugs. "It was flying Norway's flag, so you never know."

Peter's stomach twists up. "I've never been there."

"Me neither." He holds up a finger. "But if there's actually a big colony there, it can't be too hard to find, right?"

"Sure."

"Ugh, come on, kid, this is going to be a really long ride if you don't work with me here."

Peter glares at him.

"Okay, look, fine, how about this," Feliks jerks his thumb behind him. "After I drop you off, I'll go back and see if I can find Denmark, okay? If I can find him, I'll take him and bring him to right where I leave you."

"W-what?"

"It's the least I can do, or… y'know, whatever." He runs a hand through his hair and leans back against the edge of the boat. "But I can't stay with him after I take him there, got it? Even if he's hurt, I still gotta be back to my own place sometime in the next three days. A group of traders from Germany is coming to do business with me and I *have* to be there, otherwise I've got people who are going to starve." He points at Peter are stares at him seriously. "I'll take him as far as I take you. That's it. The rest is up to you and whoever you find."

Peter nods. "Can you do something?" He asks quietly.

"What?"

"If… if you do find him and he's…" his voice cracks and he pinches his eyes shut. "If he's dead, can you still bring him?"

Poland's face softens. "Sure," he says. "Even if he's dead, I'll get him back for you." He slouches just slightly, resting his chin in his palm, and stares out over the water. "Everyone should have a chance to say goodbye, right?"

The cold in Peter's stomach finally bursts and he starts to cry all over again.

Nightfall comes quickly.

Curled up on his seat, Peter sleeps. It surprises him how easily he is able to nod off; everything around him is made of sodden wood and sharp angles and it hurts his back to remain in any position for too long. But the blankets are still the same and they still smell of damp earth and when he hides himself in them, they provide just enough warmth against the cold air that he can almost pretend that he is not so alone beneath the covers. He can pretend that the scratchy material against his chin is actually Denmark's sleeve and that it's Denmark's knees that he keeps bumping into and not Poland's. It's stupid. He knows it's all just pretend, but it has enough of an effect that he can ignore his churning belly and allow himself to be rocked to sleep by the ocean lapping at the side of the boat.

He doesn't dream. And maybe that's a good thing because he isn't sure where his subconscious might take him on this night. He could have been in a warm bunker, playing games with Denmark and America, safe and sound, or he could have been frozen in time, suspended above the forest, watching a mob tear his uncle into pieces. Either outcome would have only lead him to tears upon waking, so he is grateful for the empty blackness that he finds behind his eyelids when his mind eases into sleep.

Or maybe it isn't sleep. For hours, he is dimly aware of Poland's presence somewhere above him, murmuring to himself in quiet, tired loops of words that he cannot quite bring himself to comprehend while he steers their boat through the night, an electric torch pointed at the compass on the bow. He feels like it is a situation he has been in before. Like he has heard a similar monologue from an equally exhausted man, holding a precious pin in his hand, deep underground back in Germany.

Ah, so that's it.

It comes and goes, this faint consciousness, and he loses track of how many times he is sluggishly pulled from sleep, back into reality, and then right back down again. It reminds him of being ill. He can recall, years ago, having a fever so high that he would slip in and out of himself while Finland and Sweden worried by his bedside. Denmark had been there too, now that he thinks about it. He had come over to weed the yard as payback for breaking Berwald's china hutch on New Years Eve and Peter can remember that his hands were stained green from the yard work.

"Don't like using gloves," he had said. "Feels better when you can really touch the dirt."

He had insisted on staying the night when Berwald told him that Peter was sick. He knew that both the Swede and his "wife" had to work the next morning and he also knew how the middle of the night was the best time to get sick.

"Trust me," he had said. "I'm an expert."

Peter hadn't been sure of that at the time, but was too busy throwing up into a little red bucket at two in the morning to ask about it. He had been miserable and hot and achy and unable to sleep, so Denmark had pulled a chair to his bedside and kept him company until morning, translating Swedish television for him in silly voices and reading to him out of a thick, leather-bound book from Berwald's collection. He can't remember the stories Denmark read to him that

night or the mindless sort of conversation he offered, only that even so late at night, after working for so many hours, he still had a constant grin on his face and dirt under his fingernails.

It's strange, he thinks, that he can remember such insipid little details like grass stains but not anything important.

Or maybe those are the important details. Maybe what he *needs* to remember are things like smiles, limps, and the way the blankets smell.

He isn't so sure anymore. He isn't really sure of anything.

Either way, the ocean laps at the side of the boat and Peter sleeps.

He wakes to Poland shaking his shoulders just before sunrise, the flashlight pointed at his face.

"Hey, get up, we're almost there."

Peter sits up, stiff and sore, and the blankets pool around his knees, warm still from being wrapped around him all night. The sun is only just beginning to rise and the whole landscape is a dark shade of gray, still too dim to see the floating ash but light enough to see the dark silhouettes of trees approaching on the not so distant horizon. It seems a lot more ominous than it should. The trees are still a ways off, but are tall and wiry and it reminds him of the pointy, iron fences that always seem to be around haunted houses.

Haunted.

Fantastic.

"I'm going to drop you off as far inland as I can, but you're still gonna have a little bit of a walk to get to Växjö." Poland switches the motor down to a slower setting and the boat crawls to a quiet pace. "You've got a map, right?"

Peter nods.

"Good, lemme see it. I'll show you where to go."

Peter is reluctant to hand him the fragile piece of folded paper. "Be careful with it," he says and places it gently in his outstretched hand. "It might fall apart."

"Sure, sure," he unfolds the map and spreads it out across his knees, drawing a dry marker from his pocket. "Okay, look, I'm gonna leave you right here, just outside of Väckelsång, okay?"

He makes a quick 'X' and Peter can't help but notice that it's smaller than the ones Denmark made.

"Do you have a compass?"

He nods.

"Okay, once you get there, you're gonna head west until you get to this road here," he draws a line up to a major highway.

"Denmark says to avoid big roads," Peter says quietly. "They're dangerous."

Poland's eyes flit up to his. "It'll be a lot faster this way."

"I know, but…" he bites his lip.

Feliks sighs. "Okay, look, I know this is scary, but you have to man up, all right? The sooner you go and find someone to help you, the sooner you can be done with this whole thing. I haven't heard any rumors about crazies in Sweden except for way up north, so I don't think you're gonna have problems on the road." He taps the map. "And this is the only way I know of. If you want to go another way, that's totally fine with me, but you're gonna have to figure out how to get there."

Peter clenches his fists and nods. "Show me."

Poland's eyes remain on him for a moment longer. "That's better. Okay, now pay attention because it's totally lame to repeat everything…"

And he does. He pays rapt attention to the map, listening to everything Poland tells him as he drags the marker along different roads, up further and further in an almost perfectly straight line. He circles Växjö with a flourish and hands the map back to him.

"All in all, it's gonna be thirty or so kilometers or something. You can probably make it by this evening."

Peter stares at the map. "You think so?"

"Sure," he shrugs. "You're still in pretty good shape. Denmark took good care of you."

Peter swallows thickly and turns the map into its self, tucking it away in the front pocket of the backpack. "Yeah."

"In case you can't, though, do you have something to camp with? Like a tent or something?"

He shakes his head. "No. But he showed me how to camp without one."

Feliks grins and leans back. "See? You're totally more prepared than you give yourself credit for. This'll be a cakewalk."

While Poland guides the boat closer to land, Peter begins to pack the blankets away, careful to fold them each one by one, and places them in the backpack, wondering if maybe Denmark had planned on something like this happening all along. He taught him how to navigate the land safely. He taught him how to make a shelter. He taught him how to scavenge. He taught him how to shoot.

It's just a shame he never taught him how to do it all alone.

The boat rocks listlessly when it runs ashore and Poland hops out into the shallow water and wades in far enough to drag him to solid ground. Daylight has broken by now, but only just, the air feeling damp and crisp when Peter takes his first steps in over ten hours. Tiny rocks crunch and grind together beneath his feet and in the stark stillness of the early morning, he can hear every movement with startling clarity, from the rocks to the sound of swollen waves brushing against them, seeping into the thick, dead grass and tangled roots of overturned trees. Everything seems magnified and he isn't sure if it's because he's completely terrified or if it's only because it's so early.

One step. He has water in his boots.

"If I can find him, I'll leave him right here," Poland says from behind him, still knee-deep in the surf. "If he isn't here in two days, that means I couldn't find him, okay?"

Two steps. He nods. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

There is a brief pause and he can feel the water pulling at his heels.

"If you can't find them, do you have anywhere to go?"

Peter shakes his head. "No." He takes another step and watches the grass bend under his boot from beneath the waves. "If I can't find them here, I'll find somewhere to wait for Ivan."

Poland rubs the back of his neck and exhales loudly. "You're a really depressing kid, you know that? Gosh." He drops his hand. "If you can't find them after a week, come back here and wait for me, okay? You can stay with me and my people and then you can leave with Russia whenever he shows up."

"You're not coming with us?"

He shakes his head. "I can't just leave," he smiles sadly. "I have too many people who are totally counting on me to take care of them.

Y'know, old people and stuff. We'll wait for the next one."

Peter nods. "I heard you talking to yourself last night," he says after a moment. "And I just wanted to tell you that he's okay."

Poland blinks. "Huh?"

"Lithuania. He's okay. He's with his brothers somewhere in America. He's helping with the colonies there."

Feliks claps a trembling hand over his mouth. "W-what?"

"I'm sure he'll be happy to know that you're okay too."

He stumbles sideways and Peter can hear the water slosh against the boat. "Y-you're serious? He's okay?"

Peter nods.

There is a long, empty silence before Poland surges forward in the water, splashing and floundering loudly until he reaches Peter, and he grabs him by the shoulders, spinning him around. "Here," he says breathlessly and takes his hand. "Take this back." He swallows. "Get it back to its owner, okay?"

Peter looks down at the gold pin in his palm, then back up to Feliks. "Okay."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Another pause and Poland gets back into his boat, taking a paddle in hand and pushing back from the shore. "Good luck," he says seriously. "I'll see you back here for your answer in a week."

"Two days," Peter corrects him.

Feliks rolls his eyes. "I'll have *Denmark* here in two days. I can't stay, remember?"

"Right."

The motor hums to life and Poland waves to him. "See you later."

Peter returns the wave with about as much enthusiasm as he once showed to eating asparagus and drops his arm back to his side, watching as Poland's boat gets smaller and smaller and the sea continues to wash against his boots, tugging at him like it wants to draw him in. For a long time, he just waits; watches until all he can see is water and empty horizon and Poland's boat is long gone. It's only when the dull buzz of the motor vanishes that Peter finally turns around to stare into the waterlogged woods behind him.

The water rushes in. Rushes out.

He takes a step forward and his boots squish.

Branches creak and rocks tumble together against roots, tiny sounds caught in the early morning breeze and whisked away above him.

Another step.

He scrubs at his eyes and pulls up his goggles. He doesn't have time to keep crying. He has two days to get there and back and he knows that Denmark will never let him live it down if he doesn't.

"C'mon, slowpoke!" That's what he would say. And he would knock his elbow into his shoulder and bet that he could make it there faster.

Three steps.

His feet touch dry land.

Finding the highway takes him very little time. He has to make his way through broken trees and loose soil that leaves watery prints

beneath his boots, but it takes less than twenty minutes before he climbs a low hill to meet with the wide stretch of pavement that will eventually lead him into the city. For several minutes, he stands on the cracked edge of the blacktop, just rocking back and forth on the low lip, feeling it press into the arch of his foot as he watches the empty expanse of ash-choked cars for any sign of movement or disturbance. He is well aware that there could still be people hiding inside the abandoned vehicles, maybe crouched down on seats, but he begins to cautiously make his way down the very, very edge of the road. His eyes flick to the door handles and windows of each car he passes and it is a relief to find no tracks in the dust or fresh glass on the ground. It doesn't necessarily mean he is safe, but it is at least a sign that no one has passed through in the last few hours.

As he goes, he keeps the rifle held in both hands, mindful of his trigger finger. Denmark had told him to keep it wrapped around the outside of the guard and he does just that, but still brings the stock close to his shoulder. He's jittery and nervous, he can't even begin to deny it. He wants to keep his finger jammed right up against the trigger and keep the barrel pointed directly in front of him with every step forward he takes. But panicking is going to do him no good. Panicking will lead to exhaustion, which will lead to a delay. He can afford none of that. He needs to move quickly and keep his pace up enough that he can hurry without making any mistakes.

Two days.

He has two days.

Realistically, he has more, but he doesn't want to risk leaving Denmark alone at the shore, especially if he's injured or worse. He thinks about this as he walks; what he's going to do if Denmark is dead. He's not sure if he is going to be able to handle it if he goes back and finds his body adrift in the ocean. If he is unable to find Berwald and the others, he is going to have to drag him out and bury him all by himself. That is, if there is anything left to bury; he might not find anything but sea foam and shiny pebbles waiting for him in the next forty-eight hours. Though, that might fitting as well.

Denmark turning to sea foam is certainly a nicer thought than what the humans might have done with him.

As the hours pass, he stops several times to check his map, ticking off little points as he goes to track his progress, making sure to hide himself between pieces of wreckage every time he pauses for any longer than a few seconds. He hates to admit it, but without Denmark, he's moving a lot faster and, if he can keep it up, it shouldn't take him more than six or seven hours to make it to Växjö. He has no intention of camping out tonight if he can avoid it. If he can time it properly, he should arrive just as Poland makes it back to his little port and as long as neither of them runs into problems, they can both be back to the shore by dawn.

That always has been the kind of thinking to jinx him, though.

The road winds and Peter talks to an imaginary Denmark to keep himself company. In a way, it's like when they first set out from Leipzig, when their long walks were too much of a strain for him to speak and he would just listen quietly while Peter retold all of those lovely stories he only partly knew. He tries to recall phrases and quotes from ones that he knows Denmark likes, but his mind is still reeling and no matter how hard he tries, all he can remember is the bittersweet ending of sea foam and the 'plunk' the Big Claus makes when he sinks to the bottom of the river.

"Your stories always have such bad endings," he murmurs. "What about 'they all lived happily ever after'?"

Maybe there is no such thing.

"I'm gonna make up new endings to all of your stories."

And he does. He twists them around to fit into endings of perfectly returned true love and last sentences that don't include any variation of the word 'death'. After a while, they begin to blend together and he loses track of which story he is trying to tell, the characters all suddenly reflecting a man and a boy instead of mermaids and

Chinese emperors, the plots all twirling together until the characters are simply lost in wonderland, trying to find their way home in one piece. Longer still and the tales warp into a solitary character, just one, terrified boy with nothing but a bit of treasure and an overactive imagination.

A boy.

A nation.

Alice.

"Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end," he whispers into his map.

There is a clack from behind him and something hard jams into the back of his head.

"Then stop."

He freezes at the sound of the flat voice behind him, hands instinctively tightening around his rifle. How had someone snuck up behind him? He had been so careful; had hidden so well and listened so cautiously.

"You like Alice in Wonderland?"

Peter swallows and nods, feeling the weight of the gun behind him pressing against his neck through the hood of his windbreaker. "Y-you can take everything I have."

The offer is ignored completely. "I always did like that story. I used to read it to my kids all the time." The barrel of the gun shifts. "How old are you?"

"Twelve."

"That's young. What are you doing out here by yourself?"

Peter blinks rapidly, trying to clear the tears out of his eyes. He was *so* close. "Please…" he whispers. "Please, take whatever you want, just let me go…"

The man behind him chuckles. "Come on, it's an easy question. What are you doing by yourself?"

"Växjö," his breath hitches when the gun moves again. "Växjö! I'm trying to go to Växjö to find my parents!"

"There anyone else with you?"

He squeezes his eyes shut. "No."

"All right. Why don't you put the rifle down?"

That is about the last thing in the world he wants to do, but he complies, tossing it to the ground and holding his hands in front of himself. From behind him, still out of his view, the man kicks it away and pauses.

"Any other weapons you might have?"

He shakes his head.

"You sure?"

He nods.

Another break of silence and the man whistles loudly. A moment later, quiet footsteps begin to make their way through the woods and Peter starts to panic. They come in from all sides, a group of at least ten men and women, all wrapped head to toe in thick, wool jackets and respirator masks almost identical to his own. They stop in a circle around him, a slight woman coming forward just long enough to pick up the rifle and sling it over her shoulder alongside her own, and they spend several minutes watching him tremble.

"Please," he sobs. "Please, I'm just trying to find my parents."

"What makes you think they're in Växjö?" The voice from behind him asks. "They live there?"

He shakes his head. "T-there was a man in Poland who said there was a rescue boat going to Växjö. They might have been helping…"

"The boat? Which boat?"

"I don't know."

The man nudges him forward. "Come on, you gotta be more specific than that if you want to get inside."

"I don't know!" He cries. "It… he said it stopped in Koszalin and had a Norwegian flag on it, that's all I know!"

The man hums thoughtfully. "That'd be Niels' route, then."

Peter's head snaps up. "What? Niels?" He tries to turn around but the man shoves the gun against his head again.

"Don't move so fast. You know Niels?"

"My uncle's name is Niels."

"What makes you think he's the same Niels?"

"He's Norwegian…"

"We have a lot of Norwegians in Växjö." He draws the gun away just enough that Peter can straighten up. "What does your uncle look like?"

Peter wants to smash his head against a wall. This is taking too long and he feels like his legs are going to give out with how badly they are shaking. "He's kind of short," he starts. "Um… he… he doesn't really smile and has a little hair that always sticks out."

"And what does your Niels like to do?"

"He used to go fishing a lot."

"And?"

Peter curls his fingers in and whimpers quietly. "I don't know… I don't know what hobbies he had other than complaining about my other uncle."

"He complained as a hobby?"

"I guess."

The man clicks his tongue. "And who'd he complain about?"

"My uncle Mathias."

The barrel of the gun is suddenly removed and the man laughs loudly. "Well, that's definitely the same Niels." He claps a hand on Peter's shoulder and spins him around. "I don't know about your parents, but Niels is in Växjö with his brother. They're in charge of one of our longer rescue routes."

Peter stares up at him, wide-eyed. The man is tall and his whole head is hidden inside a thick, rubber gas mask, a heavy looking pistol still gripped in his palm. Looking at him, Peter feels very, very small.

"Come with us," the man says, steering Peter into the rest of the people. "We'll take you to Växjö."

He doesn't trust them. Not for a single minute. This man had a gun pressed to the back of his head just seconds ago and he has no intention of letting him drag him off.

"W-wait! Stop!" He tries to squirm out of the man's arm. "I'll go by myself!"

"You were going the wrong way," he shoves him back onto the road and his boots clack against the pavement with each step. "We'll get

you there faster."

"I don't want to go with you!"

They don't give him much of a choice.

Charred trees are barely visible and they line the streets of Växjö like a graveyard. For as careful as he lays his steps, his footfalls seem to echo off of the water logged walls of the buildings, catching on the peeling paint and vanishing into the cold layer of fog that blankets the city, so dense that he can hardly tell the difference between it and the slowly drifting ash. It's cold here. Colder than Munich or Leipzig and definitely colder than anywhere in Poland he can remember. His teeth chatter, the sweat on his back rapidly cooled by the sudden change in pace and temperature, and he tries to pull his coat tighter, hands feeling restless and empty while he walks in between the man with the gas mask and the woman with his rifle.

Everything seems so empty. There are cars and broken buildings just like there has been in every other place he has seen, but they are much smaller in number. He only counts a dozen or so vehicles still parked on the street and they all seem to be mostly melted to the pavement in one place or another, making them permanent decorations to the city square.

"We tried to clean up," the woman explains, noticing his eyes on the gutters. "We didn't want bones and old cars to be the first thing refugees saw when they got here."

Peter nods slowly. "Do a lot of people come here?"

"It's slowed down recently." She shrugs. "Fuel for the boats is running low, so we're making less trips."

"Who are you exactly?"

She laughs from behind her mask and sweeps her hands out in front of them. "We live here," she says. "This is about as far south in Sweden that you can be that's still safe and since it's so close to the water, it's a good place to bring people by boat." She glances down at him. "You came from Poland, right? Do you have a boat?"

He shakes his head. "Someone gave me a ride."

"Ah, well, either way, you probably saw how much is under water now. When the ocean started in, people moved up and Växjö is where everyone wound up settling. We've got a little bit of everywhere here."

Peter pauses. "Is there anyone from Denmark?"

"A few."

He relaxes just slightly. "Good."

"Why?"

"Just wondering."

They come to a stop at the base of a tall building not far from the road. The bunker has a door in the ground, much like the one that belonged to Netherlands, and has not been concealed at all, instead painted bright yellow and loud against the dusty ground. The man in the mask crouches down and bangs his fist on it a few times and after a moment of muffled scuffling, there is a high-pitched crank and the lid unlocks, a pale boy about Peter's age pushing it open and grinning at the woman.

"Welcome back, mama," he says.

She pulls off her mask and Peter watches her long, blonde hair swish around her shoulders. She leans over and shoos the boy back down the ladder and climbs in after him, waving at Peter to follow her into the dark pipe.

Peter isn't so sure. He doesn't know what's down there.

"Do you want to see your uncle or not?" The man drawls.

"Yes, but…"

"You don't trust us," the woman finishes for him. "That's understandable. Normally, I'd say to just wait up here, but no one is allowed to leave the bunkers after dusk."

"Then why are you still out?"

"We're the perimeter guards. We're out here all night."

"Oh."

She sighs and leans against the edge of the pipe. "Here," she says and lays the rifle out at his feet. "As an offering of good faith. We'll trust you to take that down and in return, you'll trust us. Deal?"

It still doesn't sound like that great of an idea, but it's better than nothing. He bends down and collects the gun again, scooting nervously to the ladder and waiting for her to disappear from sight. He glances back at the man in the mask, only long enough to make sure he hasn't moved, and swings his legs over the side, taking a slow, deep breath and sliding until his boots touch one of the solid, metal rungs. He slips the rifle strap over his shoulder, turns around, and begins his anxious decent to the bottom, where he can see the faint glow of lanterns waiting, casting moving shadows directly below him. He can hear voices; it's a whole mesh of languages and they all sound conversational. Some people are even laughing. There are children too, young children from what he can hear.

His boots thud against the concrete floor when he drops the last few steps and at once, the conversation and laughter stops, replaced by a tense, awkward silence filled only by the sound of utensils being set back down on tables. Peter swallows and turns around. It's a huge bunker, at least twice the size of the one in Munich, and people

are strewn around against the walls in cots and hammocks, others seated at card tables in the center of the room, eating their dinners or playing games. The space is dimly lit by candles and flashlights that hang from the low ceiling, but even through the dark, he can tell that every single person is looking at him.

He clears his throat and pulls his goggles up to his forehead, tugging the mask down a moment later. "Hello…" he starts.

There is an explosion of sound immediately after he speaks. A glass shatters on the floor. A chair scrapes and flips a table over, the plastic bang drowned out in a rush of thudding boots, and the last thing Peter sees before being swept off his feet are broken glasses and a startled pair of blue eyes. The rifle clatters to the floor and Peter's breath leaves him in one loud, choked sob, lost in the musty fabric of a wool overcoat.

"Papa!"

A/N: Incoming glorious reunion! Incoming glorious reunion!

…That you're gonna have to wait for. I'm really, really sorry, but I've got to put this story on another brief hiatus. It shouldn't be too long, maybe a week at the longest, but I'm going through some rough stuff right now and I'm having a hard time dealing with it. Life has decided to kick me in the face on top of my health taking a dive, so I need to go stay with my mom for a few days until I'm up and moving again. I'll still have time to write, but I'm just not in the proper headspace for it, and the next chapter is quite possibly the most important one in the whole story, so I don't want to muck it up.

Terribly sorry! I'll do my best to get back on the wagon ASAP, just give me a little break to get my head screwed back on straight. OTL

ALSO! Everyone should totally go check out this over here: **tinyurl (dot) com (backslash) 24mkqft**

*It's by far the most creative piece of fanart I've ever had the privilege of receiving and it's totally rad. I want to make one and put it on my desk! *A**

ALSO X2! I recently got an account over on Tumblr and I'm having a blast with it. I mostly post nonsense and music, but I'm occasionally funny and I post about silly fandom/writing related stuff pretty often. SO, if you have a Tumblr, we should totally be bros. My username over yonder is Calciumbomb!

(Fair warning though, I curse like a sailor and frequently say a lot of inappropriate things. I'm a heckuva lot less polite on my other social profiles than I am on this one, bahaha.)

I'll see you all soon!

# of 20

Peter has never been so light headed in his life.

He can't remember the last time he's had something to eat or drink. The last can of soup had been shared with Denmark shortly after entering Poland and the water had run out just after, making it days since he's had anything but emotional turmoil and physical exhaustion. Walking and crying do nothing to recharge the body and when he is suddenly flung from his feet and into the air, everything blurs together and spins in a whirl of dim colors, gray and olive green, and he is dizzy enough that he thinks he might float away. But he has arms around him. Familiar arms, warm arms, arms that belong to *Sweden* and he's hugging him so tight that the chances of slipping free are impossible. His coat is scratchy and smells like smoke, his hands big and too rough and all over Peter's shoulders and back, digging into his coat and hauling him unbearably closer. He's here. He's here, he's here, *he's here.*

"Papa!" He sobs. Over and over, like it's the only word he knows.

There is another crash from behind him and a second pair of arms comes flinging around his sides, paired with a loud cry and a face pressed to the crook of his neck.

"Peter!"

Finland. Finland is here too. He wants to spin around to see him, but he can't bring himself to let go of Berwald long enough to do so and just lets himself go limp, collapsing into them both and losing the last hope of coherency in another rush of tears. He's vaguely aware of other voices from somewhere behind him, but what they might be saying is entirely alien to him, and he can only assume it must be Norway and Iceland.

They're here. They're really here.

Sweden's arm shifts and slips up under his knees, pulling him up and cradling him to his chest as he steps quickly out of the center of the room, not even jostling Peter with how gentle he is being with his movements. Hurried footfalls trail behind him and he sits down on one of the cots on the wall, yanking a blanket around Peter's back and wrapping his trembling frame up in it before pulling him close again. He isn't that cold; it's stuffy in the bunker and his whole body feels too hot buried under the layers of covers and jackets and arms, but no matter how hard he tries, he cannot stop shaking. He just keeps going, coughing out Berwald and Tino's names, trying to remember to keep breath in his lungs after each strained burst of muddled words.

They're really, really here.

He doesn't want to move- he feels too safe- but he needs confirmation. He needs to make sure that it's really them, and he pushes away from Sweden's chest with shivering arms to stare up at him through his tears, his face nearly crumpling again. It is him. He looks different, peppercorn shaped scars all up and down one side of his face and overgrown hair that falls into his eyes, but it's him. It's Sweden. It's Berwald. It's his *father.* He swallows and reaches a hand out to touch him and Sweden catches his wrist, fingers folding gently around him and pulling his palm to rest against his cheek, the same dark expression as he's always worn locked with Peter's watery one. His fingers brush against the rough, marred skin, across stubble and scar tissue, and he's warm.

Warm like skin should be.

Alive.

Something in his chest breaks and he dissolves into tears again, throwing himself at Berwald and clinging to his coat. "Y-you're okay!" He sobs. "You're okay, you're okay, you're okay…"

Berwald presses his face into Peter's hair. "So're you," he whispers and Peter can feel something warm dripping against his ear. "So're

you."

He draws back and twists around to face Finland, hands still fisted in Sweden's coat, and for a moment, they just look at each other, lips trembling and muscles wound tense like springs. Tino shouldn't be this thin, he thinks. He is supposed to be soft and warm, not so fragile and bony. He looks dirty, his face streaked with ash and his clothes stained with what might be wax, but through the grime and sharp angles, his eyes are still the same and spilling over with tears as he launches himself at Peter and sweeps him into a crushing hug. Peter buries his face in Finland's shoulder and they both tip sideways in the cot into Sweden's lap.

For the first time ever, Tino doesn't defend his manhood at all when Peter calls him 'mama'.

He has no idea how much time they spend in the cot, wrapped up in each other and crying, but when he finally manages to compose himself long enough to sit up, the other inhabitants of the shelter have mostly retired to their beds, the lanterns switched out and candles snuffed. Maybe it was later than he thought when he first arrived or maybe that much time really has passed, but he's still so shell-shocked that he can't even ask. He struggles to get his feet back under him, leaning against Sweden and still clinging to Finland's hands, and tries to get a handle on his reeling head. Norway and Iceland are sitting on the floor by the cot, Iceland with a flashlight, and are watching them patiently while they compose themselves.

They both look much the same as they used to. Norway's hair has gotten longer, enough that he has it pulled into a small ponytail, and he notices that Iceland's left hand is missing all but his thumb when he stands up and offers the flashlight to him. They are both thin, but with enough still of their preposterous prettiness that they don't look sick- just wraithlike.

"You guys are all okay…" he stammers. He clutches the flashlight tightly and flicks it on, sweeping the beam over their whole dirty little

group. They're all dressed almost identically, heavy boots laced up over dark green jumpsuits and wool coats, and it takes him a moment to recognize them as the same emergency fatigues that were handed out in his bunker back in Munich. He reaches out, still so disbelieving, and grips Iceland's sleeve. "Even… even you?"

Iceland nods and sits down on the edge of the cot. "I was in Oslo at the time," he gestures to Norway and it's a bit unsettling without fingers. "We came together."

"By boat," Norway adds. "We'd heard a rumor that there was a terrifying Swedish man building a colony here. Turns out it was true." He leans against Iceland's legs. "We had to hunt for Tino, though. He was hiding."

"I was *not* hiding," Finland tries to huff indignantly, but it comes out as a half laugh instead. "I was just a little flooded in."

Peter blinks rapidly, trying to process everything still. He made it.

"Took Nor's boat to th' coast," Sweden says.

He really made it. He found them.

"Found 'im on th' roof of a house in Kouvola."

He found them and they're all here.

"Been runnin' boats fer a while now."

They're all here.

Except…

"Denmark!" Peter exclaims suddenly and nearly falls off the cot with the force of scrambling forward.

Finland catches him and pulls him back, chewing his lip and easing him back against the wall. "We… we weren't able to find him," he

says carefully. "We spent months looking, but-"

"He's dead," Norway says, his voice clipped, and looks away from the bed. "There was never anything to find."

Peter shakes his head. "No, no, he's not!" He squirms out of Finland's arms and whirls around to face Sweden. "He was in Germany! H-he was with me the whole time." He turns to look at Norway. "He's the one who got me here."

Norway's face hardens. "Impossible."

Peter shoves his hand into his pocket, rummaging frantically until his fingers wrap around the gold hairpin, and he throws his arm out to show it to them all. "This is yours, right?" He asks. "Your pin?"

"Where…" Norway swallows. "Where did you get that?"

He leans down and presses the clip into Norway's palm. "Denmark had it," he says. "He was keeping it safe for you."

For several moments, Norway just stares into his hands, none of them saying a word. "If that's true," he says finally, cautiously. "Where is he now?"

Peter's stomach knots up. "We got separated in Poland. We were both supposed to get a ride from Feliks, but we were being chased and his boat only had two seats." He curls his fingers into a fist. "He made me go without him."

"How long ago was this?" Iceland asks. "You just got here, so…"

"Yesterday. I don't…" he pauses. "I don't know if he's still okay, but Poland said he was going to go look for him and bring him back to where he left me."

Norway gets to his feet. "When?"

"Within two days," Peter tries to stand up as well. "It's thirty kilometers from here, if we leave now, we can-"

Finland catches his elbow and sits him right back down. "We can't leave now," he says. "Not until morning. No one is allowed to leave after dark."

"What? Why?"

"S'too dangerous," Berwald nods in the direction of the ladder. "Scavengers come out."

"What?"

"They're people," Finland says. "And they're extremely dangerous. They wait for the bunkers to close up for the night and go out looking for anyone still outside." He sighs heavily. "They hide during the day and we don't know how many of them there are in the area, but when someone disappears, it's because they were out after dark."

Peter's stomach lurches and he tries to sit up again. "W-well, then we *have* to go tonight! What if they find him before we do?"

Tino looks conflicted. "You said Poland was bringing him, right? Is he coming too?"

"No, no, no, Poland isn't staying with him! He's by himself and he might be hurt!" He pulls the flashlight to his chest and stares at the floor. "And he's sick and he can't run anymore and we can't just leave him…"

"He's sick?" Norway's eyes narrow. "How sick?"

"Really sick. He's going blind and he can't breathe without this," he knocks his knuckles against the mask around his neck and squeezes his eyes shut. "He made me take it."

Sweden stiffens and he swings his legs over the side of the cot, getting to his feet and buttoning his coat. "Ash got to 'im." He turns

around and nods at Peter. "I'll go."

"I'm coming with you," Norway is quick to add. He gingerly sweeps his bangs into the clip and secures it above his ear, letting his fingers brush against the dull metal for just a moment longer than necessary. "If that idiot can't walk, you're going to need help getting him back here. Where is Poland dropping him off?"

Peter sits up. "By Väckelsång. I can show you where it is." He starts to climb out of the cot. "If we hurry, we can be there in a few hours and-"

Finland grabs the pack of his jacket. "Stay here," he says sternly. "It's too dangerous at night around here, let us take care of it."

Peter stares at him. "No."

"No?"

"No." Peter fixes a strained look on him. "Please," he pleads. "He took care of me this whole time, I can't just wait here when he needs help." He turns back to look at Sweden, then back to Finland. "You guys don't know exactly where it is. What if you get lost?"

"Peter…"

"Let him come," Iceland interrupts. He blinks blandly when they all look at him, shrugging. "It's only fair."

Finland wrings his hands. "Okay," he says after a moment and stands up as well. "We'll all go. Berwald, get our day pack and a few knives please?"

While Sweden goes to gather their things, Peter jogs over to the base of the ladder and picks up his discarded rifle, hurrying back to push it into Tino's hands. "Here," he says and takes a step back. "You're a better shot than anyone else."

Tino blinks and runs his hands over the stock. "Where did you get this?"

"It's Denmark's."

"It's…" he smirks lightly. "A piece of garbage."

"We know. But it still works, so it's better than nothing, right?"

"Right." He turns back just as Sweden returns and quickly divides a roll of small knives and plastic masks between them all, handing Peter one just for good measure, and hoists the pack over his shoulders. "People are going to yell when we try to leave. We're very much breaking the rules right now, so when they start protesting, just keep climbing up, okay?

Peter nods.

"Okay." He slips the respiration mask on and gestures for the rest of them to do the same. "Once we get outside, Peter, I want you between Berwald and I no matter what."

"Okay."

"I'll bring up the rear," Norway offers.

"Good. Iceland, keep close to him, just in case." Tino pauses and passes a small flashlight to Norway. "Let's be quick about this. If we're gone for too long, they're just going to assume that we're dead and give our beds away to someone else. If Denmark's hurt or sick, I don't want to be camping outside."

There is unspoken agreement between them all while Finland takes the lead and begins up the ladder. At first, no one seems to notice, but by the time Peter starts up after Sweden, loud whispers have started to spring up around the bunker, lights flickering on and people pointing. Iceland begins to climb and the people begin to

shout at them to stop. Norway follows him and the crowd is on their feet, jeering.

"You're going to die out there!"

"Don't you dare open that hatch! You're going to let them in!"

"Come back down!"

It's hard to ignore them. Peter has to force himself to keep his face to the wall and not retaliate to any of their yelling, especially when they begin throwing insults and curses around. He squeezes the rails and just keeps climbing. He can't get mad at them; he can understand their fear of the dark, probably better than any of them could ever know, but they don't know why this midnight excursion is so important and they don't know what is at stake. He can't blame them.

Outside, the air is freezing cold and blows his hood back the moment he is free of the entry pipe. Sweden helps him out all the way and sets him on his feet, but he has to keep an arm on his sleeve to keep from bowling over in the wind. It isn't as bad as when he and Denmark first set out from Leipzig, but it is still startling and uncomfortable after having spent so much time wandering in temperate weather, the gusts hard and knocking gritty bits of sand against his goggles.

"Is it always this windy?" He calls.

Berwald nods and bends down to help him slip his hood back on. He pulls the cord down tight and loops it around Peter's zipper to keep it in place. "S'good," he says. "Worse th' weather, less chance people're outside."

Finland drops the bunker door closed once they are all outside and screws it shut, wincing when the lock inside slides into place, sealing them out until morning. "Let's get going," he says over the rush of wind. He clicks on a flashlight. "Are you all in decent enough shape to jog?"

They all nod, even though it's a lie.

"Just until we can get out of the city," he motions for them to follow. "Come on."

Traveling this late at night is a process that is entirely foreign to Peter.

Up until now, he has only been on the roads from the early morning to the late evening, Denmark always making sure that they've stopped and made camp before dark. He's used to seeing the path coated with ash and the dim light of musty afternoons, long-range vision obscured but visibility otherwise completely clear and open. Seeing it now, pitch black and illuminated by the single beam of a dying flashlight, is eerie. It's a different kind of quiet- empty. The ash still drifts, he can see it in the light, but it doesn't seem to make any noise now, leaving every other sound to be amplified by the tense air around them. Boot scrapes sound like rakes on the pavement and Peter swears he can hear them all breathing, even with the masks and layers of clothes. It's unsettling. He doesn't like the way the dark swallows everything, though the silence could work in their favor should someone try to sneak up on them. Still, it makes him nervous and he grips Sweden's hand as they jog down the highway, leaving the city to vanish in the hollow blackness behind them.

They don't speak unless they have to, whether it's to pause for directions or to check up on everyone. They aren't at a full run, but the moderate pace is still hard enough that they are out of breath each time conversation is exchanged and eventually, they give up all together and Peter just pulls them in the correct direction. They aren't able to run for long and they slow to a brisk walk ten kilometers from the bunker, easing into a single file line along the edge of the cracked pavement with Finland leading them. They move cautiously, trying to keep their steps as quiet as possible on top of gravel and brittle bits of debris that crack and snap under the slightest pressure. Norway brings up the rear, somehow able to maintain silence better than the rest of them, and every so often,

Peter will glance back at him, just to make sure that he is still there, his steps in time with Iceland's and his face set in a grim, determined line.

He's worried, Peter realizes. He can remember Norway making that face only once before, during Hurricane Adam, when Denmark had gone missing for three days in the ensuing chaos. The face had been different then, though; he had been worried, but confident still. Now, there is no trace of that air of self-assurance. He seems tired and tense and even through the dark, when he isn't looking, Peter can tell that he keeps reaching up to touch the clip in his hair, like a reassurance. Whether or not it is a comfort to him, Peter doesn't know, but he figures it can't be much different than the way he occasionally brushes his fingers across the rough, canvas straps of his backpack.

Comfort, maybe. Motivation, absolutely.

Four hours pass without much incident. They pause every so often to check the map and make sure they are still on track, and Iceland is on top of keeping them hydrated and fed with a canteen and pack full of rations, but otherwise, they travel in stoic silence. The wind has started to die down, which, while easier to travel in, provides them with less noise cover. Branches above them rustle together in the breeze that remains, their steps crunch, and the dark continues to close in around them.

It's near their fifth hour when through the silence, a slow creak sounds. Sweden doesn't give them time to process the noise and shoots off of the road, dragging Peter and Tino with him, throwing them into the ditch below the street, flinging his arms over them and pressing them into the dirt. Iceland and Norway are right behind them, and they bury themselves in the brush and brambles. Peter struggles to catch his breath, twisting to try and face Sweden, but one glance at his face tells him to shut up and keep his head down. He hides his head beneath his arms and holds his breath, listening, and tries to keep as still as he can, watching Tino's hands slowly drawing close to himself to grip the rifle.

Above them, slow footsteps echo off of the pavement. At first, he thinks it might just be one set, but as they get closer, the shuffling of at least two people becomes apparent, as does the groan of rusty wheels and a light clicking that he can't quite place right away. He bites his lip. They aren't very well hidden down in the ravine, their only real cover being the dark, and if the people above them have flashlights…

The clicking stops and for a moment, there is more silence. Then a clank, something metal rustling against fabric, and then muffled snuffing. A dog. They have a dog. Peter's heart begins to race and he digs his fingers into the ground. They have a dog. They have a dog and a dog would be able to smell his incredibly unwashed body from across the whole country if it wanted to. Even if they don't have a light, all they need is for their dog to leap into the ditch. They're going to get caught.

Peter turns to stare pleadingly at Finland through the dark, willing him to shove Sweden aside and take shots at the two people. He *has* to, but he doesn't and Peter can feel his arms begin to shake with each second that ticks by with no activity.

Take the shot… he thinks to himself. *Please, please, please take the shot.*

Nothing. Finland doesn't move and neither does Sweden. Above them, the sniffing stops, replaced by a suspended quiet filled with a tapping boot and more of the metallic jingling.

"What'd we stop for?"

"I dunno, stupid dog is losing his mind or something."

A thud and a high-pitched whimper from the dog.

"Can't tell the difference between something alive and it's own ass anymore."

"I doubt it smells much different."

A bark of laughter.

"All right, let's keep going. It's gonna be light soon."

"Yeah, okay."

A clang.

"We gotta get him back before the fires die out anyway. No sense in bringing him unless we can use him."

Peter's eyes widen when a third voice suddenly cuts in, nothing more than a weak moan of protest.

"Idiot, I thought I told you to put him out."

"I did!"

"Not very well."

Steps and the sound of concrete scraping against concrete.

A wet crack.

"There."

"Ugh, all right, that'll do. Now come on."

"Coming."

A chain rattles. Boots scrape, nails click, and as quickly as it came, the noise is gone and they are again in silence.

No one dares to move. Not yet. Not until they are absolutely certain. They stay in the ditch for at least half an hour, until the pale light of morning begins to turn the black into dark purple and Finland cautiously worms his way out from beneath Sweden.

"Stay here," he whispers. "Nobody move until I check."

He doesn't wait for confirmation and drags himself up on his knees and crawls forward, up the ravine, and back up to the road, straightening up with the rifle shouldered firmly until he is on his feet again. For several minutes, he just stands there, turning in a slow circle. He's searching. Waiting for the worst and poised to face it should it make its self known.

It never does. The ash drifts and the quiet remains and Finland waves them up. Peter's knees are wobbling too hard to move without help and Sweden scoops him up and carries him back to the highway.

"Y'alright?"

He nods. His heart is still hammering, though, and it nearly leaps into his throat when Tino turns the flashlight back on. On the pavement, there is a small pool of blood, streaked sideways into the tracks of small wheels, and beside it, a heavy piece of broken concrete has been discarded, one side stained dark with slippery red and bits of skin.

Blood, flesh, and tufts of wiry, blonde hair.

A/N:

Hurricane Adam/Anatol was a huge windstorm that hit Denmark, north Germany, and south-west Sweden in December of 1999. Though it wasn't technically a hurricane, it is still referred to as such in Denmark and had wind speeds that were the equivalent of a category 1 hurricane. There was over fifteen billion DKK worth of damage, six deaths, and over eight hundred injuries.

Okay, sorry it took me so long to get this up. Life has been kind of balls lately. OTL

I am, however, starting my vacation tomorrow. For the next two weeks, I will be in Greece, so updates are unlikely. I'll be bringing a notebook with me for the plane ride over, so I should be able to at least get a rough draft finished. If there is time, I'll type it up while I'm there, but don't count on it. I'll be too busy eating yogurt and rolling around on nude beaches!

See you all soon!

# of 20

Iceland is the first to notice Peter's discomfort upon seeing the blood dampened chunk of concrete. He pauses mid-stride at the top of the ravine, curious, and waits for the others to turn back down the road before he steps over and places a hand on Peter's shoulder. He nudges him a bit, enough to at least break eye contact with the grim implications at their feet.

"I know what you're thinking," he says quietly. "It wasn't him."

Peter bites his lip and curls his fist into his windbreaker. "But what if it was?"

"It wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me." He gestures behind them with his head. "He's too stupid to even surrender properly. Even if he had no arms or legs left, he still would have been fighting them, right down to his last breath. Which he would probably waste on something dumb so he could make it like an action movie or something." He shrugs. "That's just how he is." He pats Peter's shoulder one more time and turns to head up the highway again. "C'mon, we should catch up."

Peter nods, but lingers. He turns slowly back to look at the red piece of debris again. He doesn't like how the words 'last breath' sound when Iceland says them. He says them too casually, almost like they are an afterthought of something that doesn't really matter. He knows it's an unfair assumption, but he's spent months with Denmark and it's seemed like he has been taking 'last' breaths every single day. In a way, he supposes, Denmark *has* been fighting, but not against an enemy or any kind of outside danger; he has been fighting himself. He's been kicking and screaming, scraping tooth and nail to keep the right to take so many last breaths and, lost

cause or not, he has been winning. He's managed to tumble through more helpless situations than Peter cares to count. Floods, fires, heat, people. It's been dire, he can't even begin to deny that, but besides perhaps Sweden, Denmark is the strongest person he knows. And if he can wage war on himself and win...

Peter turns and jogs to fall into step beside Iceland. "You're right," he says and grabs the older boy's sleeve, pulling him forward in encouragement to walk faster. "There's no way that was him."

Iceland hurries along next to him. "So, you believe me?"

"Completely."

Sunrise comes before they can make it to the water. The light comes as a thick, milky gray, cold and fog riding its coat tails through the trees and blowing slow puffs of ash-laden wind against their coats in silent whirls of white noise. Finland continues to head the trail and he is too cautious for Peter's liking. His steps are measured and quiet and the rifle is kept at his shoulder with the barrel pointing out like a compass into the woods; he's stalking nothing, making absolutely sure that another dive into the ditches will not be necessary. He can appreciate it, but Peter wants to run. He wants to be brash, noisy, and unhinged, because he knows that they are getting close. He can smell the faint, sharp edge of seawater, almost akin to a well-loved perfume in the way it throws his memories loose, reminding him of home and rust and boats and abandonment. It should scare him. But while it does make his heart race, Peter is not afraid of the ocean.

He is afraid of what he will find there.

He knows that he isn't the only one, either. He can see through the hard stares and clenched jaws that Sweden and Norway both carry and through the way Iceland picks at the dry skin around his lonely fingers. Even through Finland's determined expression, Peter can see it. He can see it in all of them. They are just as tense and worried as he is, if not more. There isn't a single one of them who

looks confident and the silence around them as they approach the tangle of salt-stripped trees speaks volumes, heavy and transparent, and it makes Peter's heart hurt. The fear they feel is different than his own. Peter is scared because Denmark is a new best friend; a protector and guiding figure to lead him through what is left. He's put Peter before himself in every respect and kept him safe, kept him company, and showed him how to keep himself. He's just *been there* and Peter is terrified because if Denmark is dead, he will never be able to forgive himself.

But for the rest of them, it's far more potent. They've known him their whole lives, were practically raised by him, and have blurred the lines between brother, friend, lover, and enemy so many times that they have rewritten their roles together entirely. They've loved each other, hated each other, fought each other ruthlessly, but they've always come back to each other. They have been dealing with his assumed death for over a year already and now, after being thrown a piece of hope, may have to start all over again, closing up personal wounds torn right open again.

Torn open by Peter.

Maybe it's guilt that keeps him so motivated even now. Despite how often Denmark told him otherwise, Peter does not feel grown-up or brave, not even in the slightest. He feels like a very small, very meek, poison that may or may not drop into his family's water supply. If Denmark doesn't make it home, it's his fault and he knows that they will blame him. Sweden and Finland will not mention it, but he is sure Norway and Iceland will make no effort to conceal their contempt, all while Peter tries to get a hold of his own crippling grief. They will slowly but surely distance themselves from him and he will be alone again, before they can make it to the United States, just like he had been in Munich.

He grips his zipper pull and shakes his head. He can practically hear Denmark chastising him for thinking things like that.

"Dummy, they would never do that," he would say. "Quit wallowing."

Peter swallows. He knows that, but...

Denmark would smile. It would be all teeth and he would clap his shoulder. "You're gonna need to take care of each other, right?"

Yes.

"So, man up, kiddo."

Selfish. He hasn't learned a thing.

His boots squish and he snaps his head up at the first sound of rolling waves. He can't wait like this any longer. The ocean's edge is right there and personal safety is the last of his concern. He rips off his backpack and throws it behind him, shoving past Iceland and breaking out into a sprint through the trees, Finland's alarmed cry trailing behind him, but unable to catch up in time as he whips past the branches he broke not two days ago, kicking up leaves and ash and mud that smells like brine. His chest burns. It hurts to run this hard. His legs ache and the wet switches from dead trees sting against his face, and it *hurts* to be doing this.

"Please be okay..."

He bursts through the trees and onto the shore out of breath and clutching his chest. The water is dim in the morning light and laps gently at the thick mats of overgrown grass and shiny pebbles, rushing up and down in quiet little sighs that rustle and bend with the water. He tears away his goggles and blinks against the cold breeze. The morning fog is beginning to burn away, but without the colors of a sunrise, it only appears eerie and empty. He rushes forward to stand at the damp line the sea has drawn in the earth, turning in circles and clenching his teeth, as he searches for any sign that he is not alone. Footprints in the mud, blood trails, *anything* . But there is nothing. The ocean licks at his boots and the long, carved out shore remains undisturbed by anything but his own shaking breaths. He spins and runs to the far end. Maybe he's just early. Maybe he beat

Poland here and the boat is still on it's way, the hum of the motor lost in the fog further offshore.

The tide gurgles and washes over his toes, dragging back and leaving something behind. Peter bends down to pick it up with trembling hands, his eyes widening.

A single, brown, leather glove.

Peter feels like he is drowning. "No, no, no..."

He can hear the crash of branches behind him. Finland and the others are getting close. He clenches the glove between his fingers and whips his head up, racing back to the other end of the beach, crying Denmark's name until his voice cracks and he crumples to his knees in the surf, feeling sand and freezing water seep through his pants and too-hot tears searing the corners of his eyes.

He isn't here. Denmark isn't here.

He pitches forward, scraping his palms against the rocks and grass, and beats his fists against the water, screaming through his teeth while sobs burn in his throat. This isn't how it was supposed to happen. They were supposed to make it here together, supposed to make it *home* together. Denmark was supposed to tackle Sweden and sweep Norway and Iceland off of their feet while Finland pulled them all together into a great pile on the floor of the bunker where they would stay until they all managed to stop crying. They were supposed to all be here and it's not fair that after that, after all of that, everything is ruined.Riding the belief that they could make it should have been all that they needed to keep each other safe, but he failed. "Keep an eye on your uncle." That's what Ida's father had said to him and he couldn't even do that. He couldn't look after him and now he's gone and everything is *wrong.*

Squeak

He snaps his head up so fast that his neck pops and his goggles fly off somewhere into the mud. Through the fog, the sound is nearly swallowed up, but it repeats its self and he scrambles to his feet, stumbling and splashing as he surges forward toward the slow, wheezing noise, until he is knee deep in the sea and wading toward a cluster of branches.

Squeak

A wet *plunk* from his left and a small, purple, rubber dog toy floats to meet his shins.

"Denmark?" He shrieks and tears past the sodden tangle, pushing them aside and at once, loses his footing and falls flat on his face in front of a small, outcropping of dirt and roots at the far, far end of the beach. When he looks up, the first thing he sees are bits of shredded fabric drifting in the tide, tiny swirls of black running out of the heavy canvas like ink from a broken pen, and then boots and hands and matted blonde hair just barely poking out from the other side of a collapsing stump.

"That... better be you, kiddo."

There is a rush of heat in his stomach and he launches himself upright again, grabbing a fistful of the torn coat and hauling himself forward, his eyes burning from salt water and his breath suddenly missing entirely when he rounds on the fallen tree.

He's sitting, waist-deep in the ocean, tipped sideways just a bit and resting his back against the chipping wood. There is moss in his hair and stuck to his face in clumps of diluted red that drip from somewhere above his ears, his skin raw beneath streaks of black ash, and when he slowly lifts his arm to wave, his sleeve drops around his scabbed elbow in burnt strips. He gives him a mid-air salute with two fingers and lets his hand fall back into the water.

He doesn't open his eyes or make any effort to get up. "Hey."

Peter's lips begin to tremble and he throws himself forward, crashing against Denmark's soaking wet chest and throwing his arms around his neck. He's completely lost for words. He tries to say hello, tries to ask if he's okay, but all that comes out is a garbled mess of sobs and apologies that disappear into the singed lapels of his coat. He buries his face in his shoulder. He can feel him breathing, stuttery and short, and he can feel every scratch, bump, and burn against his cheeks. He smells like petrol and smoke and a little like seaweed and his arms are a solid weight when they drag up to wrap around Peter's waist.

"Y-you had that stupid dog toy," he sobs.

Denmark nods and exhales slowly into Peter's hair. "Tried to yell," he mumbles hoarsely. "No luck."

Peter pushes back against his arms and darts his eyes over him, blinking rapidly, searching him for any hint that he might not really be here. He looks exhausted, heavy and burnt around the edges, but in otherwise one piece. He reaches out trembling fingers to pinch Denmark's chin, brightening when his eyebrows crease and he sighs through a lopsided grin.

"What's that for?"

Peter scrubs a hand over his eyes. "Just making sure." He takes a steadying breath and grabs Denmark's hand. "C-c'mon, the water's cold. The shore is over there." He frowns when he still doesn't get up. "Aren't you freezing?"

Denmark's smile falters and he carefully pulls his hand out of Peter's. "Maybe." He rests his palm on the surface of the water and lets is run between his fingers. "A little bit." He turns his head straight again and unevenly blinks his eyes open from behind his hair. "Where's it at?"

Peter's stomach clenches. There's no color left in either of his eyes; just two empty pools of dead looking white, each with the dot of a

milky pupil. He watches Denmark blink a few times, tipping his head to the side again to press against the stump, his hand disappearing into the water beside him like a weight he can no longer bear to hold up.

"You..." Peter's breath hitches. "You can't...?"

"Nope."

"Nothing?"

"Little bit of light."

Despite every instinct that tells him not to, Peter waves limp fingers back and forth in front of his face, waiting for a reaction that never comes. He draws his hand to his chest. "I can lead you back," he says thinly. "It's not that deep of water."

Denmark laughs lowly from somewhere deep in his chest and allows his eyes to slide shut again. He shakes his head. "Nope."

"What?"

He pulls his hand out of the water just to drop it back against his knee. "These too."

Peter sucks in a breath and feels pricks at his eyes again. He opens his mouth, unsure of what exactly to say, but he is interrupted by a sudden burst of frantic splashing from behind them, Finland's voice carrying over the water, calling his name over the clamor of stomping boots and shifting ocean. He hurries to his feet and turns back to face the way he came, cupping his hands around his lips and calling out for them.

"He's over here!"

The churning water gets louder and Denmark struggles to push himself upright.

"You found them?" He asks. His eyes flick open and try to see again. "All of them? Are they okay?"

Peter drops back down to his knees and carefully pushes him back against the stump. "Hold on. They'll be here in a second and we'll get you out of the water, okay?"

Denmark shakes his head. "They're okay?" He hunches over and coughs into his palm. "Is it all of them?"

Before Peter can reassure him, the branches fly apart and Finland comes slogging through the water, soaked up to his armpits in droplets and carrying the rifle over his head. His eyes widen when he stops. His face breaks into an enormous smile and he starts forward again, only to be bowled over by Norway shoving past him in a flurry of foaming sea and heavy wool. He pauses directly in front of Denmark, lips barely parted, his throat working as he gets slowly down to his knees and lifts his hands to hover on either side of his face.

"Denmark?"

Denmark's eyes flit back and forth, trying to pinpoint where he is. "Norway?" He pushes up with his hands to sit straighter against the log.

Norway swallows and nods, brushing his fingers against Denmark's cheek, trailing it along faded scars and through tracks of blood and ash and the reddened skin around his eyes. He spends a moment just touching him, fingertips, knuckles, and the back of his hand all stroking up and down the length of his chin, across the bridge of his nose, even his ears, taking his time in taking the new features of his expression.

Finally, he licks his lips and stills his hand on Denmark's cheek. "Yes," he says. "It's me."

Another long stretch of silence settles between them wherein Denmark just stares blankly at Norway, his mouth opening and closing like a trembling fish out of water. He lifts his hand. Drops it again. He tries several times, but manages only to uphold his stricken silence, and just as Sweden and Iceland push through the trees, he gives up and settles for simply turning his face into Norway's palm, pressing against him to hide the way his eyes clench shut, tears running oil slicks to his chin.

"Norge..." he whispers, wet and hitched, somewhere between and cough and a sob, and pulls both hands up to grip Norway's wrist, drawing it firm against his cheek. "You're okay..."

Norway brings his other hand to the back of Denmark's head and carefully pulls him forward to lean against his chest. The water around them ripples, the ends of both of their coats fluttering while Denmark clings to Norway's back and cries into the crook of his neck, the rest of them visibly restraining themselves from ruining the moment with a reminder of their presence. Peter watches them silently, his hands clasped in front of himself and squeezing. This marks the second time he has really seen him openly weep.

But this time, it doesn't seem to be out of sadness.

Norway pulls back, out of Denmark's crushing embrace, and Iceland and Finland rush in to replace him, barreling into him from either side, arms clamping around his neck and arms while he stares at the surface of the water and laughs through tears that don't stop coming. Peter can faintly hear him babbling Iceland's name and doesn't miss the flash of concern that passes over his face when Iceland's hands touch his, but it doesn't last for more than a second. Sweden comes up beside him and drops a hand on his shoulder. Peter leans against his leg.

"Told you I wasn't lying," he says, grinning.

Sweden nods. "I believed yeh."

Denmark struggles to sit up from beneath the pile on top of him. "Sweden?" He coughs. "Berwald, you mother fucker, if you're just standing over there and not planning on helping me up here, I'm going to break your face."

Sweden glances down at Peter and shakes his head. "Nothin's changed."

Peter smiles. "Nope."

Sweden pats his arm and wades through the water, crouching down in front of Denmark for a brief exchange of silent challenge, daring the other to go first, before he sweeps him forward into a hug that takes up his entire upper half, Denmark wheezing breathlessly and whacking him on the back.

"That's more like it," he mumbles, water streaming from his sleeves and rolling down the sides of Sweden's coat as he forcibly musses the other man's overgrown hair. "Asshole, waiting that whole time and making me worry about you. What kind of brother are you?"

Sweden squeezes him, maybe a little harder than necessary. "Y'weren't worried."

"Were you?"

"'bout you? Nope."

Denmark grins and wraps his arms around Sweden's head, burying his face against his scalp. "Dick."

"Crybaby."

Denmark slaps his back again and pulls back, grinding his palm into his eyes, still unfocused and unsure where to look. "Hey, did you see I brought your kid back for you?"

A small smile works it's way to Sweden's face. "No, y'didn't. Y'left 'im alone in Poland." He turns to look at Peter, who grins, and then back

to Denmark. "He found us 'imself. Good try, though."

Denmark falls back against the stump. "I have the most ungrateful family in the universe." He sags a bit, eyes threatening to drift closed. "Can we please get out of the water?" He coughs. "I've been in here for hours and I can't feel my fingers anymore."

Norway scowls and places his hand on the back of Denmark's elbow. "Why didn't you just get out? The shore isn't far, you could have felt your way across."

Denmark doesn't make an effort to reply and Peter bites his lip. Once again, he's being too stubborn to ask for help.

"He needs someone to carry him," he says quietly, shrinking when they turn to face him. "He's sick, remember? His legs..."

Finland makes a startled gurgling sort of sound and sloshes through the water in front of Denmark. "Is that true?" He asks shrilly. "You can't walk?"

Denmark scrubs a hand through his hair and nods.

"You should have said something sooner!" Finland shoves the rifle to Iceland and hooks his arms under Denmark's shoulders. "You and Berwald both, I swear. Too proud to admit you have a problem." He easily pulls Denmark up, a cascade of water draining from his coat, supporting his weight as he drags him to stand on feet that no longer keep him upright. "Peter, we left the bags on the beach. Please go unpack the blankets we brought and wait for us there, okay?"

Peter nods and does just that. He hurries against the tide back to the water's edge, his boots crunching against the rocks with each step as he runs along the shore, searching for the discarded packs. He finds them on the opposite end and makes a grab for them before he is even out of the water. He unlatches the flap and begins to tug out the thin, emergency-issue blankets, doing his best to keep them dry by draping them over his arms, successfully laying out all three just

as the others come back into view and start to make their way over to him. Sweden has Denmark on his back, arms under his knees, and he crouches down in the grass next to Peter when he makes it ashore. Denmark is lying limply against him, face turned sideways against his shoulder, eyes closed and mouth lax.

"Thanks, kiddo," he mumbles when Peter begins to wrap the blankets around him. He sounds exhausted. More so than before; like the two words are a strain.

Peter just nods and pulls the last blanket up to cover his head after slipping the respirator mask over his nose, back to it's rightful place.

The walk back to the bunker seems to take less time in the daylight.

Finland occupies the empty spaces with light conversation and questions about their journey, especially keen on any of the parts that include Peter's bravery, which Denmark tiredly plays up at every opportunity.

"He had my back the whole time," he says. "Whenever it got rough, he'd smack me back into shape. He cracks his eyes open when Peter snorts. "Right?"

"More like the other way around. He kept trying to give me life lessons and stuff with dog toys and trees." He tugs on Iceland's sleeve. "Did he do that to you too when you were little?"

Iceland rolls his eyes. "Don't get me started."

Peter grins and runs ahead of them when the city starts to come into view through the ash, his hurried pace echoing against the buildings and broken concrete as he jogs to the yellow hatch in the ground. He bangs on it, like the people before had, and it starts to twist open right when Sweden comes to a stop next to him. The woman who answers recognizes Berwald and waves them in without a word, sliding down the ladder and vanishing from view.

Finland breezes past and starts into the pipe. "I'll spot you," he tells Sweden. "The passage is wide enough that we should be able to pass him down."

Denmark groans. "You're never telling anyone about this."

"Cooperate without complaint and we'll see," Norway says and helps to guide Sweden backwards into the entryway.

It takes a few minutes of awkward shuffling, but they make it into the bunker just after dark. Peter helps Iceland drag their cots together while Finland goes to pull dry clothes from a rations bin against the wall.

"They're probably going to be a little big," he says while Berwald gently lays Denmark out on the beds. "They're some of Sweden's."

"They dry?"

Finland starts to undo the buttons on Denmark's waterlogged coat. "Of course."

"Then I couldn't care less." He bats Finland's hands away. "That being said, if anyone is going to undress me, it's going to be Norway."

Finland purses his lips. "Fine, fine," he says with a dramatic roll of the eyes. "Pardon me for encroaching on your chastity." He drops his hands to Peter's shoulders and smiles. "Come on, we'll get you something dry to wear too."

He starts to steer him to the crate, but Peter glances back, just in time to catch Norway slipping Denmark's threadbare shirt over his head. He's thinner than Peter initially had imagined, jutting ribs hidden beneath the folds of his heavy coat, and spindly blue veins stand out disproportionably against his paper-white skin. Whether it's the bruises or the bones, Peter isn't sure, but something about the sight is deeply unsettling to him.

"Peter," Finland says softly. "It's not polite to stare."

Peter nods and forces himself to face the clothing bin. "Sorry."

They all change out of their wet clothes quickly and return to the cluster of cots in their own little corner of the bunker, easily occupied by a stern look from Sweden. Denmark remains on his back, blankets up to his chin, with his head in Norway's lap, eyes occasionally fluttering open to see what isn't there. While they all get settled, Peter grabs his backpack from beneath the legs of the beds and parks himself in Sweden's lap.

"So, we brought you guys presents," he says, grinning.

Denmark lifts his head. "Did they seriously make it past that run through Poland in one piece?" He slurs. "For real?"

Peter nods. "I was careful."

Iceland cranes his neck to peer curiously over Finland's shoulder. "What is it?"

Peter pulls the bottle of beer and can of pineapple out with a flourish, presenting them with both hands. "Treasure!" He exclaims. "There's enough that we can all have a little."

Finland's eyes bulge and he snatches the beer up. " *Beer?* " He whispers loudly. "You found *beer?* Where?"

"In a grocery store. Under some shelves." He hands the can of pineapple to Sweden. "We wanted to share it with you."

Sweden reaches into a canvas bag hanging from a hook on the wall and begins to open the fruit with the thin can opener he pulls free. "Nice 'f yah." He peels the tin lid back and licks his fingers, brows lifted in approval. "Ice, forks."

Iceland nods and slips off to the retrieve them while Finland pries the cap off of the beer with his teeth.

"This is fantastic," he says dreamily, bringing the cap to his nose and inhaling deeply. "Thank you, Peter."

"I found the pineapple," Denmark grumbles into the blankets.

Norway smoothes his hair back, letting his hand rest on his forehead. "Thank you, Denmark."

Denmark tips his head back to slip his eyes beneath Norway's hand. "S'more like it."

Iceland returns with a few forks and he distributes them to everyone who has a free hand, with the exception of Denmark, who doesn't even pull his arms free of the covers when he is offered one. Finland is the first to taste the beer and, when he does, he flops sideways against Sweden with the most blissful expression Peter thinks he has ever seen him wear. Before it can spill, he passes it to Iceland, who passes the pineapple to Peter.

"You brought it," he says, smiling lightly. "You go ahead."

Peter grins and eagerly dips his fork into the can, picking up a single piece of the soft fruit and bringing to his lips, sugary syrup catching in the corner of his mouth, washing over the barely there tartness. He chews slowly. Forget anything he has ever said about birthday cake or Christmas cookies; this is the best thing he's ever tasted. After nothing but cold soup and ration bricks, the flavor just about knocks him over.

Sweden peers at him from over the beer. "S'good?"

"It's so good." He sits up, holding the can in both hands. "That's not all we brought, though. We have good news too." He smiles and looks over at Denmark. "Do you wanna tell them?"

"Mngh. You g'ahead."

Peter nods and as they pass the beer and fruit around, he tells them about Russia's submarines and the colonies in the US. They all listen quietly, chewing or drinking while the information sinks in, and eventually all agree to make a break for whatever city is left still standing near Gothenburg to wait out the last few days before his arrival. While they discuss and begin to make plans, Peter finds his eyes straying from the heart of the group to Denmark and Norway. Norway wears a strange expression, something that Peter can't read, and he keeps stroking Denmark's hair from somewhere under the stack of covers. Denmark has yet to taste their spoils, content to just lie in bed and be doted on, and while Peter doesn't want to interrupt them, he isn't about to let it go to waste and he shifts over to sit on his knees next to Norway, holding out the bottle.

"Here, we saved you some."

Denmark makes a sleepy, noncommittal groan and doesn't make an appearance outside of the blankets.

Peter pulls away slightly, face falling. "You don't want any?"

Denmark breathes in. "I'm kind of comfortable," he murmurs. His eyes blink half open. "Sitting up seems like a lot of work."

"But…" he wraps his fingers around the cool glass. "We were saving it so we could all have it together."

The corners of Denmark's mouth turn up. "Ah geez, don't sound so sad." He drags a hand free and pushes the covers down. "All right, Norge, you push. Peter, you pull." He holds his arms out. "Hop to it."

Norway rolls his eyes and shoves him upright just long enough for him to fall bonelessly back against his chest, propped up to take the beer. "You're so lazy," he sighs.

"Hey, you try swimming across the ocean with only your arms and then come talk to me about lazy."

"You didn't swim," Peter grins. "Poland found you."

"Yeah, in the middle of the water."

"Really?"

"Yep." He holds out a hand for Peter to pass him the bottle. "After I blew up his truck, I ran clear to the other end of that sad excuse for a beach. I was trying to find another boat, but my legs gave out before I could."

Wide-eyed, Peter presses the beer into his palm. "What did you do?"

"Told you I'd swim if I had to, didn't I?" He smirks with one side of his face. "I found an old tire, drug myself to the water, and started floating. Bobbed out there for hours before Poland found me. Pretty awesome, right?"

Peter nods enthusiastically.

Norway does not share his interest. He shakes his head. "You're such a liar."

Denmark shrugs and brings the bottle to his lips. "Maybe." He takes a small sip and tips his head back into Norway's shoulder, letting the beer rest on his tongue for a moment before swallowing.

"Well?" Peter asks when he doesn't say anything. "Do you like it?"

Denmark blinks. "Mm," he nods. "It's good."

Peter frowns. He had been expecting a reaction more like Finland's. "Do you want some of the pineapple?"

"Can I just have the syrup?"

Peter raises a curious eyebrow. "Just that?"

"It's my favorite part."

"Oh." He sits up and takes the can from Finland. "Do you want any help?"

"Nah," Denmark takes it from him. "Worst case scenario, I dump fruit all over myself."

"That's not a risk I'm will to take," Norway says crisply and plucks the can away. "That's my bed you'd be soiling."

"Don't say it like that, Nor. Makes it sound gross."

"Point is," Norway slides his fingers through Denmark's hair and sits him up. "I don't want pineapple juice all over my blankets. Here," he holds the can to his lips. "Drink it."

Denmark grins and happily complies, taking a long, slow swallow as Norway tilts the can, careful and cautious, toward him. He moves just a bit too fast and a tiny stream of juice escapes out of the corner of Denmark's mouth. He tries to catch it, but Norway pulls his head backward, two fingers beneath his chin, and takes care of it for him in one slow sweep that ends with their lips pressed softly together.

"How is it?" He asks after a moment, hovering just above him.

Denmark runs his tongue over his lower lip. "Dunno," he says. "Can't really taste it." He grins. "So, hypothetically, let's say I *do* drop pineapple all over myself. Would you-"

Norway shoves him sideways into the cot. "I'm getting ready for bed."

Denmark laughs to himself while Norway pads over to a line of people waiting to brush their teeth with rags and recycled water. He lies limply on his side, seemingly content in that position. "You still there?"

Peter nods and shifts forward so that their knees touch. "Yeah."

Denmark is quiet for a moment before be reaches out a hand for Peter to take. "We did good, didn't we?"

He laughs and laces their fingers together. "Yeah, we did."

"Were they surprised to see you?"

"Totally. I wish you could have seen it."

"Did Sve cry?"

"Maybe. I think so."

"And I missed it. Go figure." He flashes him a lopsided grin. "Think he woulda cried if I would have shown up instead?"

"Oh, definitely. I bet there would have been snot and everything."

"Gross."

"Yep. You're lucky I softened the impact before you got here." He punches Denmark's shoulder. "You owe me."

"I guess I do, huh?" His face takes on a new expression. "You were about the only thing that kept me from losing my mind out there, so I think fair compensation is absolutely necessary."

Peter wrinkles his nose. "I was just kidding."

"Don't be so modest. You deserve something cool for doing such a good job. Do you still have that notebook?"

"Yeah, hold on." Peter hops off of the cot and goes to his backpack, retrieving the ratty book. He flips it open as he walks back. "There's only one page left."

"Fitting." Denmark rolls over onto his back. "Gimme."

He hands it to him along with the market. He sits back on his heels and watches as Denmark fumbles to find the edge of the page. "Do you want me to do it for you?"

"No way, that ruins the surprise." He tilts it closer to himself, slowly dragging the tip of the marker in careful lines. "And no peaking."

"I won't."

Denmark pauses, beginning to write. "Man," he laughs. "If my handwriting was bad before, it's going to be impossible now. If you can't read it, give it to Sweden. He's a pro at reading my chicken scratch."

"Okay."

He waits patiently while Denmark writes blindly across the paper, tearing it out once he's finished and folding it into what looks like some kind of lumpy, lopsided origami frog, the message hidden in the folds of it's back. He holds it out for Peter to take. "Don't open it yet," he says. "Wait until tomorrow."

"How come?"

"Because I said so."

Peter pouts. "That's no fair," he says. "You suck at giving presents."

"Do not. This one is totally awesome. Best thing ever. Your friends are going to be so super jealous."

"Don't hype it up!" Peter whines. "I want to open it now."

"Nope. Tomorrow only." He snatches the frog out of his hand. "I'm going to hang on to it to make sure you don't cheat." He laughs at Peter's annoyed expression and hands the marker back to him, settling into the cot with a hollow sounding sigh. "I'm so tired," he mumbles.

Peter nods. "You should go to sleep."

He makes a face. "M'not ready to yet."

"Then don't be such a complainer."

"You've been hanging out with Norway too much," he grins.

Peter matches his smile. "And you haven't been spending *enough* time with him."

Denmark's eyes crack open. "I'm gonna," he says seriously. "Tonight. You think you can handle sleeping flopped over somebody else?"

"Of course I can," he huffs. "I'm not a little kid. I can sleep by myself."

A pause and they both snort in amusement. After a moment of composure, Denmark's face softens and he holds an arm up, motioning for him to bend down.

"Hey," he says quietly. "C'mere."

Peter smiles and ducks into the offered embrace, lying beside him and resting his head against his chest. Something about the tight hug feels different, but he can't figure out what- Denmark is silent and solid, both hands stilled on Peter's back, but something feels like it's still missing. He bends his neck, letting his face press into Peter's hair.

"You really did do good, Peter," he murmurs. "I'm really proud of you."

Peter feels his face heat up and he grins into the itchy fabric of Denmark's shirt. "It's only because you helped me."

"Either way, the point still stands." He pulls back and ruffles his hair. "You're gonna knock 'em dead someday, kiddo."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely." He nudges him. "You should get ready for bed too. Could you do me a favor and get Berward? I need to talk to him real quick."

Peter nods and drops to the floor just as Norway returns and slips back into his place behind Denmark, drawing him onto his back to nest his head in his lap. Sweden is talking quietly with Finland, a conversation that stops as soon as Peter approaches them, and he tugs on Berwald's sleeve.

"Denmark wants to talk to you, papa."

Sweden nods and rises slowly to his feet. "Though 'e might." He exchanges a glance with Finland. "Back 'n a minute."

Finland smiles while he goes and waves Peter over to sit next to him, draping an arm around his shoulders and tucking his hair behind his ears. "We should cut your hair tomorrow," he sighs. "Berwald too. You're starting to look like those horses Iceland likes so much."

Peter blows his bangs up out of the corner of his mouth. "I think we all need haircuts."

Finland hums in agreement. "I think I might give Denmark his tonight. Maybe we can get him looking like his old self again."

"I dunno, he's pretty sleepy."

"Yes, I suppose he would be." His hand stops on top of Peter's head and he looks across the line of cots to where Sweden is kneeling beside Denmark's bed, talking with him and Norway, a faraway shade of detachment hovering over his features.

Peter scowls and gingerly takes Finland's wrist. "What's the matter?"

Finland exhales deeply, closing his eyes, and circling his arms around Peter's waist. "Did you know that a cockroach can live for up

to two weeks without it's head?"

"Yes?"

"That's kind of remarkable, isn't it?"

"I guess?"

Finland sighs again and kisses the back of Peter's neck. "I think we should all sleep together tonight," he says softly. "All under the same covers so that we know everyone is there."

Peter brightens. "Can we?"

Finland smiles and nods. "You and Denmark can have the middle. It's only fair since you've been outside for so long."

Peter leans back into Finland's hug and grins. "That's a good plan."

He waits for Finland to reply, but it never comes, and he follows his gaze back to Sweden just as he stands up, leaning over the cot and gently taking Denmark's face in his hands, bending to press a kiss to his forehead. It's a strange thing to see. For as long as he can remember, the only real physical contact between the two of them has been jabs and ribbing with the occasional handshake or hug; he's never seen Sweden willingly initiate contact first, especially not in regards to a gesture so tender. He moves sideways just slightly, closer to Norway, and Iceland steps in beside them to seat himself on the edge of the bed, staring placidly while Denmark places a hand on top of his and mumbles through something that Peter cannot hear, he too eventually slipping down to mime Sweden's actions by way of laying his head atop their intertwined fingers.

Peter leans over. "What are they doing?" He whispers.

Finland smiles and brushes his hair back. "Saying good night."

"Oh." He tilts his head back. "Shouldn't we do that too, then?"

"Yes, we should." He lightly pushes Peter up and stands up beside him, a hand on his shoulder as he leads him over to the cots, where he sits on a corner next to Denmark, warmth radiating from him when he slides the back of his knuckles across his cheek. "We've decided it would be best for us all to sleep together tonight," he says evenly. "If that's all right with you, of course."

Denmark turns his head out of Norway's lap and sighs through a smile. "That's the best idea I've ever heard." He wiggles his eyebrows. "I get the middle, right?"

"You may have to fight Peter for it."

Peter sticks his tongue out. "We can share."

Denmark nods. "We've gotten good at sharing sleeping space. Did you tell them about the trunk?"

"Yeah," Sweden says. "Says yer stupid hair kept pokin' 'im all night."

"First of all, slanderous lies, my hair is not stupid. Second of all, he kept kicking me."

Peter laughs and tugs the corner of the blankets up, scooting himself under them next to Denmark, grabbing his arm and carefully avoiding Norway's lap, not even daring to encroach on that space. "It'll be fine tonight, though, right? Since we've got beds now."

"It'll be perfect tonight."

Iceland and Sweden look at each other for a moment before they both slip under the covers as well, Finland wedging himself in the last bit of space at the edge of the cot behind Sweden while the others tangle their arms across Denmark and Peter's shoulders. Norway remains where he is, leaning against the wall, both hands still placed gingerly on either side of Denmark's head, and he politely declines the invitation to lie down with them.

"I'll be fine here for the night," he says. He strokes his fingers up Denmark's neck and bends to kiss each of his eyelids. "If you get uncomfortable like this, just tell me."

Denmark leans into the touch. "M'never uncomfortable when m'with y'guys," he slurs into his palm, already on the brink of unconsciousness. "Could lie here f'rever."

Peter props his chin up on his chest and peers up at him through his hair. "Does that mean you're ready for bed now?"

Denmark nods slowly, a wide smile creeping across his face, and he drags an arm around Peter, drawing him in close. "Yeah," he breathes quietly. "M'ready now."

Iceland glances at Norway before he reaches up and switches the lantern off.

For at least an hour, they lie awake, wrapped up in each other, making menial conversation about things that are too silly to matter. Finland tells stories about weekend camping trips during humid summers, how the bugs were too noisy to sleep and how the water smelled like fish and moss, tiny details that Peter makes sure to remember and appreciate. Iceland and Sweden have their own tales to offer, shorter and less enthusiastic, but with no absence of description in the way they tell them, words spoken into the corners of pillows and rolls of wool blankets, each ending with Denmark humming approvingly until the last lantern in the bunker is turned off and silence settles in for the night. In the dark, the stories fade out into muffled whispering and soon, all but Peter and Denmark are still awake, though it's obvious that the others are just pretending, and Peter props his chin up on Denmark's chest, sighing deeply.

"This is good, huh?" He murmurs quietly. "We're all together again."

"Mm. S'just like I imagined."

Peter pauses, staring into the dark and picking aimlessly at a hangnail on his thumb. "Hey…" he starts. "Are you really okay? You've been acting weird all night." He folds his hands under his chin. "You seem like you're sad."

The blankets rustle when Iceland turns over to face away from them and Denmark doesn't reply.

"Can I ask something?"

"Mm hmm."

"Did you know cockroaches can live for up to two weeks without their heads?"

"Yeah."

"Finland thinks that's pretty cool." He sits up slightly and stares at where he thinks the wall might be. "You know," he says after a moment. "England told me a story once a long time ago. He told me that nations can live for up to three days after their hearts stop as long as their head is still on. So that they can take care of unfinished business with their kings or their people."

"S'a good story."

Peter chews on his lip. "Is it true?"

A pause.

"Could be."

"Hey, Denmark?"

"Mm?"

"Are you dead?"

Denmark drags a hand up and places it gently on Peter's shoulder, coaxing him to lie down. "Go to sleep, kiddo."

Peter's hands begin to tremble. Slowly, he straightens his legs out and turns his ear against Denmark's chest, closing his eyes and holding his breath as he listens for something that he already knows is not there.

Denmark runs his fingers through Peter's hair. "And the world keeps turning."

The bed suddenly feels a lot less warm.

Despite his best efforts not to, Peter falls asleep some time during the night. When he wakes, it is not due to a flurry of activity or noise, but rather a heavy absence of both; a distinct lack of mood and atmosphere that reverberates through the bunker straight into his bones, aching. He hears the news before he sees it, not wanting to open his eyes to face it just yet. Wrapped in the blankets, Finland's sniffing is muffled and he can only just hear Iceland whispering something in his own language, soft and personal, away from the rest of them. He can feel warmth around him and he knows that he has been moved at some point, into Sweden's lap if he had to wager a guess based on the heavy hand laid stock still on his back. He tries to will himself back to sleep. He tries and he tries because he doesn't want to face what's coming, but his chest is so tight that he begins to worry that his heart might be falling out.

When he pushes himself up, he can feel everyone looking at him at once and as the blankets fall around his waist and he lets go of Sweden's shirt, he silently hopes that none of them will say a word to him until he has a chance to speak first. He rubs his eyes. He can't turn around until they are completely clear because this is not a moment that can be blurry when he remembers it down the road. He blinks; lets the texture of the covers come into focus. He figures it must still be early since there are only a few lights on yet and there are still people sleeping, though the residents in the cots immediately

next to them seem to have already moved to the other side of the room to give them their privacy.

Small victories, he supposes.

He doesn't turn around until both feet are on the floor and he is sure that he is really on solid ground. The concrete is cold, even through his socks, and he has to grip the edge of his coat to keep from shivering. Finland is the first to meet his eyes and his stare is red-rimmed and tired, the tip of his nose already rosy and chafed though it could not have been more than a few hours since they all went to bed. Peter looks at him for a moment, halfway between accusing and crushed, and then slowly pushes away from the side of the cots to face the very center, where the blankets are still piled in one place, just as he left them before bed.

Denmark's head is turned away from him just enough that he can't see his face. His arms are above the blankets, both hands white and resting on his chest, one laced loosely with Norway's, who still sits behind him with his lap as a pillow, a vacant expression on his face as he stares at the wall through half closed eyes. Iceland is at the foot of the bed with his palm over his mouth and he doesn't spare much more than a glance over at Peter as he approaches, shaking his head and going back to his own internal mutterings. Peter pauses a step away and turns back to Sweden. He isn't sure if he is seeking permission or if he just needs the knowledge that he is there to catch him during the inevitable fallout, but he has to see him before he can breech the last bit of freezing floor, reassuring or otherwise. Berwald isn't wearing his glasses and already, Finland has taken Peter's spot in his lap, the both of them leaning against each other in various states of unrest, and he clenches his jaw when his bleary eyes meet Peter's. He says nothing. His face belays nothing. But it's enough and Peter clutches his jacket just a little tighter and takes the step into the shadow of Denmark's bed.

His eyes are still open. Just a little, blue barely visible through blonde eyelashes. He expects to see him with a smile on his face, but his mouth is just a thin line, parted in the very middle, and Peter thinks

he looks unimpressed. Bored, even. It doesn't suit him at all. He's the kind of person who looks awkward unless they are happy or, at the very least, moving around, and it's ten kinds of wrong that he can't even begin to name. He reaches a trembling hand out to grip the gathered bits of fabric around his shoulder, his stomach dropping when there isn't a trace of warmth left in the ratty shirt, and he has to resist the urge to tug on it in an effort to wake him up. Every instinct he has is screaming at him to nudge him; to try and force him upright again and remind him that no, he can't be dead because they still have to get to the submarines and he needs to see Ida again and he promised to bake something for them once they were safe again and no, no, no, get up, get up, please get up.

But one look from Norway tells him not to even think about it and he settles instead for digging his fingers into Denmark's shoulders and swallowing the sob that bubbles up in his throat when the fabric yields against stiff muscle.

"You knew…" he whispers. "All of you already knew."

Norway looks away from him and nods. "Right when I saw him."

"Why didn't you tell me?" His teeth clamp down over his quivering lower lip. "How come we still did all of that last night?"

"There's no sense in ruining the last few hours with tears," Norway says quietly, free hand coming up to stroke through Denmark's hair. "The time to be happy was limited. There is plenty of time for mourning now."

Peter twists back to stare at Sweden and Finland and he can't decide if he feels betrayed or not. "You should have told me," he says, his voice wavering. "I could have… I could have…" He doesn't even know how to finish that statement and scrubs his wrist over his eyes, determined to keep his eyes clear.

"Didn't want yeh t'be sad 'til he was gone," Sweden mutters. "Last thing he saw b'fore 's eyes went was you cryin'. Said he didn't want

t'hear you sad anymore. Wanted t'go out on a high note."

A high note? What note? There wasn't a note of any kind; no dramatic last gasp or important speeches, just an anonymous slipping in the night with no warning or cushion. Peter balls his hands into fists and spins back to the cot. He breathes in, trying to steady himself. He reaches out again and gingerly takes Denmark's cold hand into his, running his thumb over his scabbed knuckles, still black with ash and washed in the scent of gasoline. He isn't supposed to look like this. He's supposed to say something stupid and then tack a dumb life lesson onto it like he's being wise; he shouldn't just be lying there, looking so utterly comfortable in Norway's lap that it would be a shame to disturb him. It's not fair to the rest of them.

Peter's vision blurs and he has to bite his cheek to keep himself focused. "Did he say anything?" He asks wetly. "After I fell asleep?"

Norway nods and finally breaks his staring contest with the wall, sliding his hand into his pocket. "He said to give this to you," he holds out the wrinkled, paper frog. "Said it was a present for you and none of us should look at it."

Peter gulps and takes it with shaking fingers. He had forgotten all about it. He holds it carefully in his palm, watching it like he expects it to come to life and start jumping around at any second- he doesn't want to open it. It's last words and it's either going to be something so completely stupid that he hates it forever or something that is going to be uncharacteristically poetic that it breaks him into a million pieces right in front of everyone in the bunker. When he edges a finger under the first fold and pulls it open, though, it turns out to be neither.

He stands for a moment, shaking, before heat bursts from his eyes and he crumples to his knees, wailing into his hands.

The Kingdom of Denmark hereby cedes all remaining arable land to the True Sovereign State of Sealand

A/N: *Ahem.*

Apology # 1: Terribly sorry for the obscene length of this chapter. Clipping down the last chapter carried over poorly here.

Apology #2: I actually posted this last night, but forgot to make it public. SORRY SYU. ;A;

Apology #3: SORRY I'M A DICK

So, depending on how I can format the next chapter, there may be an epilogue, so the next chapter may not be the last. Not sure yet, we'll see.

As always, thank you for reading and putting up with my long absence while I was on holiday. The next bit should come within the next few days.

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Peter has never had anyone he's been close with die before. He doesn't know what to expect when the rest of them start making preparations and he really, really doesn't know what he is supposed to be feeling while he watches them do it. He wants to help, but he's so emotionally bowled over that all he can do is lay on his side, trembling in the cot while he watches Norway wring an old dishtowel in soapy water and begin to clean Denmark's face in gentle little swirling motions, his mouth set in a deadpan frown as he works. He pulls the rag across his cheeks and lifts away the layers of ash and grime until nothing but chalky white skin faces him, and he sets the water back on the floor and spends several minutes staring down at him, a hand on top of his head, blinking and touching without saying a word, turning only when Finland quietly steps to his side with an armful of canvas bags. There is a nearly silent exchange of words and the bags change hands before Finland leaves Norway alone again with his thoughts. He goes right back to his staring and Peter wonders how he's managed to keep himself together without crying for so long.

Iceland and Sweden spend a few hours outside of the bunker looking for supplies while Norway finishes and Finland takes his place to cut Denmark's hair. He works differently than Norway; his hands are not steady and every so often, his shoulders will jump with a quiet hiccup. But he is meticulous and careful and the *snip snip* of scissors fills the space around the cots until he's done and Denmark almost looks like used to.

"Maybe the long hair was better," Finland murmurs, paying no mind to the tufts of blonde littering the floor beneath his feet. He wipes his nose with the back of his sleeve. "It helped hide how thin he is."

Peter doesn't have an opinion one way or the other. Bangs or not, Denmark still looks dead and no amount of washing or trimming is going to change that.

When Sweden returns, he has dead leaves clinging to his jacket and a long cord of rope looped around one shoulder. He nods to Norway. "We're ready."

Norway looks like he might have something to say, but he replies only with a jerky incline of his head and asks Finland to help pick Denmark up. It's a grim spectacle, watching them wordlessly strap his body to Sweden's back, swathed in a blanket even though he no longer needs it, but Peter can't look away. Not because it scares him or makes him uncomfortable, but because he *needs* to see this through. There has been plenty of beginning and end, but if he's learned anything, it's that the middle is what he needs to pay attention to, even if it is through tear-blurred eyes. Even if it hurts his heart, he mentally catalogues the way Sweden stumbles when he stands up, counter-balancing Denmark's weight, and how Finland wrings his hands and sniffles. How Norway's face doesn't even change.

Finland shuffles back to the cots and places a hand on Peter's shaking shoulder, coaxing him to sit up and put his coat on. "We need to go outside for a while," he says. His voice cracks on 'while' and he swallows it to keep it from deepening. "You should be there."

Peter nods and slowly starts to get his boots on. He doesn't like the way Finland is biting his lip and clenching his hands together. "You don't have to pretend it's not sad," he says aimlessly. "If you want to cry, just cry."

Finland's teeth threaten to chatter and he nods. "I know." He sucks in a shaky breath. "I just don't want to scare you."

"You crying doesn't scare me." He scrubs his wrist over his eyes and slides off of the cot, immediately reaching to take Finland's hand and squeezing. "Denmark being dead scares me."

Finland's tears hit the concrete of the bunker floor while they climb the latter.

Iceland is waiting for them outside, looking pale and tired when they emerge. "They're getting a head start," he says and waves at them to follow him. "I'll show you where it is. The clearing is about a kilometer from here."

Peter winces against the cold and stands as close to Finland as he can without tripping him. "Where are we going?"

Iceland glances back. His eyes are red. "The ocean."

Somehow, the walk there feels longer than the months it took to find their way. He plods alongside Finland with Iceland a few paces ahead, a deliberate distance created by the snowy haired boy in an effort to hide the way he drags his feet and tugs at his coat sleeves with the pieces of his hands that he still has left. Finland isn't fairing much better. His nose is still pink and clogged with sniffles. The air is cold, but Peter doesn't feel it; all he feels is the dense, awkward sadness of people who have known each other forever, but have no idea what to say anymore.

When they get to the clearing, Sweden is hunched over Denmark by the water's edge. He's laid out on his back, resting against a flat, shoddy little raft made of broken tree branches and rope, a craft apparently put together by Iceland and Sweden earlier in the day, and Sweden is adjusting a wool blanket around him, tucked in beneath him and secured around his now bare neck.

"No sense in wasting the coat," Norway says before Peter can even ask why they've undressed him. "Resources are too scarce."

Peter nods and swallows. His eyes follow Denmark's body to his feet. The canvas bags from before are full of sand and tied to his ankles. "You're going to put him out to sea? You aren't going to just… bury him?"

Finland shakes his head. "The soil is too loose by the water and too hard in the woods to make it back by dark." He fixes his mouth in a grim smile. "And we don't have a horse to send with him."

"Too dangerous to burn 'im," Sweden mumbles and tugs at the knots keeping the raft together. "Could lead scavengers to th'bunker."

Norway carefully folds Denmark's coat and tucks it away in one of the empty bags they've brought with them. "That, and I'm sure he's had enough ash to last him into the next life." He turns and slips the back of his hand down Denmark's cheek. "Modernized or not, he's always been a sailor at heart. I think he would approve of a burial at sea."

Peter is pretty sure he would have approved of being alive more, but he keeps that thought to himself and just nods.

"The ropes are old," Iceland says quietly. "They'll start to break apart after they've been in the water for a while."

He nods again.

"The boat will sink in deep water."

Nod.

"We'll just need to push it out far enough for a riptide to take."

Nod.

"Peter?"

"I don't like it," he blurts, ignoring the startled faces of the rest of them. "It's the ocean's fault that he lost all of his land and made him weak enough to get sick." He balls his hands into the front of his coat, staring at Denmark's still face. "It's like giving it the last laugh."

Norway's face hardens and he straightens to his feet. "Then what do you suggest?"

The question catches him off guard and he flounders uselessly for an answer before managing nothing but a meek "I don't know."

"It's a cruel joke, this whole thing," Norway says. "But no one is laughing. Not even the ocean." He sweeps his hand over the coastline. "Water in, water out. If it took his land, then all we are doing is sending him home."

"But…" Peter deflates and sinks back into Finland's arms. "It's not home if your family isn't there…"

Not a single one of them has anything to say to that.

Sweden takes his time with the ropes, but there is only so much dawdling he can do before it becomes obvious that he is stalling and Finland moves to wrap his arms around his neck, kissing the back of his head and pulling him up. He whispers something in his ear and Sweden pushes his glasses up his forehead to rub his temples. A nod. A wave. All of them circle the raft and again, each of them bends down to kiss Denmark's face, lingering little touches that seem far too gentle and kind for the way they have all lived. When it's Peter's turn, he doesn't know what to do. For the whole journey here, he has clung to Denmark's arms, held his hands, and curled into his embrace while they slept; it all seemed right then, but just desperate now that his arms are stiff and folded beneath the blanket. He sits on his knees next to the raft, his fingers moving back and forth in a million false starts, and he has to blink to keep his eyes clear enough to even look at him.

"What should I…?" He whispers. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Iceland exhales quietly from behind him. "Whatever you need to do to say goodbye. Say whatever you need to say, even if it's only to make yourself feel better."

He can think of so many things he needs to say, he isn't sure how to sort them. They get jumbled up in his head, tangled to the point where he can't even figure out which is which, and he can feel the rest of them watching him expectantly as he digs a shaking hand into his coat pocket. He holds the crinkled, waterlogged map and marker

in front of himself for a moment, eyes locked with the enthusiastic, black 'X' over Poland. He can't remember how many times he caught Denmark staring at it during the night when he thought Peter was sleeping, a small smile turned up on his face as he had his whispered conversations with an imaginary Norway. That stupid mark had been their hope. *His* hope. Having their path get closer to it had motivated them and inspired them and, in the end, they never were able to finish drawing a line from the border to Slupsk. They had been too busy running for their lives and leaving their uncles to face a hail of gunfire.

He bites his lip and pulls the cap off of the marker. Balancing the map on his knees, he draws a careful line through Poland, across the water, and up to Sweden, where he makes a thick circle around Växjö. It seems a little pointless, since they'll be leaving for Gothenburg in the morning, but seeing it there helps to ease the churning in his stomach. He discards the marker to the dirt and reaches forward to tuck the map into the blanket, against Denmark's chest. He leans forward and gently presses quivering lips to his forehead.

"Thank you," he whispers, feeling tears streak down his face. "For taking me home."

The ocean is bitterly cold when they each take a corner of the raft and carry it into the water, wading in as far as they can before lowering it and letting it bob out of their hands. Norway stands at the head of the rickety thing, the last to let go, his fingers seemingly unwilling to move away from Denmark's cheeks. He doesn't say anything at first. He doesn't even look down at him, his eyes focused instead on the horizon as the first signs of sundown begin to turn the clouds a darker shade of gray, his thumb absently sweeping back and forth in Denmark's hair. Finally, he turns, unfazed by the freezing waves, and bends to brush their lips together.

"Goodbye, old friend," he murmurs. He draws away and gives the raft a small push. "Enjoy the great hall."

It doesn't take long for the water to grip the branches. They stand in a limp half-circle, still waist deep in the sea, and watch as the waves tug the ropes and draw Denmark out, small droplets of water brushing up and rolling down the blanket until soon, he's out beyond where even Sweden can go and they are left to wait for him to simply vanish. Peter's teeth chatter, but he doesn't feel the cold. He isn't sure he's feeling anything but the sting in his eyes and the twisting in his stomach.

"Is anyone going to say anything?" Finland asks quietly.

Iceland unfolds his arms and lets his hands dip into the water. "What is there *to* say?"

"I don't know." He takes a step back to stand closer to Sweden. "I guess I've gotten used to funerals with toasts and songs." He glances at Norway, whose eyes are still locked with the raft. "Like from before this all happened."

There is another break of silence where Finland tries to think of something, but fails to get a reign in on his thoughts, giving up in favor of sinking against Sweden's chest and releasing a shaky sigh. Iceland looks like if he tries to open his mouth, he might start crying right alongside Peter and Norway is still as quiet as a stone wall, refusing to look at any of them. After a moment, Sweden reaches out to take Peter's hand and pulls him close, clearing his throat and straightening his back.

He begins to hum.

Peter doesn't recognize it at first. It's slow, but inappropriately upbeat for the occasion, and he nearly rounds on him until Iceland joins in and realization hits him like a bag of bricks. Der Er Et Yndigt Land. There is a Lovely Land. Denmark's civil anthem. He's heard it before at football games. Finland starts in as well and Norway a few seconds later; Peter doesn't know how the song goes and Sweden's voice is hollow sounding and scratchy. But somehow, it manages to overcome the churning water and just as it ends, he squeezes

Peter's hand and they watch in silence as the raft disappears somewhere where the sea meets the sky.

They stand in the water for a short time after, making their last, personal farewells, before one by one, they trudge back to the shore, dripping wet and dragging their feet through the loose soil.

"We should go back," Finland suggests gently. "It's going to be dark soon."

Norway nods, not turning away from the water. "I'll be right behind you."

"Peter?"

He shakes his head. He doesn't want to leave just yet. "I'll come back with Niels."

"Peter, I don't think-"

"It's fine." Norway waves over his shoulder. "He can stay."

Finland doesn't look terribly convinced, but Sweden and Iceland each take one of his hands and begin the walk back to the bunker, leaving Peter alone at the shore with Norway and a heavy, heavy silence. He stands a few paces away, not wanting to invade his space, trying desperately to conjure up some kind of comfort but coming up empty. He doesn't know Norway that well. He's always been the quiet uncle who knocked around the noisy uncle and the one who was in charge of their annual New Years party. He's never hung out with Norway like he did Denmark. Although, had he arrived in Munich rather than Denmark, Peter is sure he would not have been any less excited.

Still.

He isn't sure what to do with his hands; his pockets are as wet as the rest of his coat. He looks down at his feet and tries not to chew his

lips worse than they already are when he starts to mumble something that he himself is not even sure makes sense. Probably not. He doesn't know what comfort is. Not like this.

"What do you think happens to people like us when we die?"

Peter blinks and looks over at Norway. He's still staring out at the sea. "What?"

"You're still young. You have enough imagination."

"Oh." He digs the heel of his boot into the sand. "I don't know. Probably the same thing that happens to everybody else."

Norway closes his eyes and sighs, a wisp of a breath that catches on the breeze before Peter can really hear it. "Probably."

There is another period of struggling silence before Peter manages to gather the guts to finally speak. "Can I ask a question?"

A noncommittal hum that could mean yes or no.

"When we were letting him go… how come you didn't say that you loved him?" He fidgets. "Or something?"

Norway glances over at him. "You don't like it?"

"Well, no, it's just..." he bites his lip. "While we were out there, he used to take your hair pin out and talk to it like it was you. And then, he would tell me stories about stuff you guys did together and he would get really upset when he worried about what might have happened to everyone." He stuffs his hands into his waterlogged pockets. "He really, really missed you."

Norway is quiet again for a moment. "And I missed him," he says finally. "More than you could know. Iceland and I searched for him for months after what happened and when we couldn't find him, that's when it started to feel like the world had really ended. It wasn't fair that all of us made it out when he didn't." He brushes his fingers

through his hair and touches the pin. "I spent a long time dealing with it. I've already mourned him once and I'm not sure I can do it again." He sighs. His hand drops back to his side and he tilts his head to the sky, blinking against the drifting ash. "I made my peace with him last night. He already knew how deeply I cared for him and if he still didn't get it after last night, saying it one more time wouldn't have made a difference."

Peter nods dumbly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound like you don't care about him."

"It's fine."

"No, it isn't." He takes a tentative step closer. "I know that you love him."

Norway's breath stills. He looks down at Peter. "What?"

"I said I know that you love him."

"Ah." He turns back to the water. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not using past tense."

Another step and he starts to notice that Norway's hands are trembling. "Just because someone is gone, that doesn't make you love them any less." He pauses. "Right?"

Norway brings his fingers to his lips, releasing a barely restrained breath and blinking rapidly against the wind. "Right."

Silence.

"Do you think the boat has sunk yet?"

"Probably."

Plip

"Hey, Norway?"

"What?"

"You don't really like being touched, do you?"

Plip

"No, not particularly."

"Oh."

Plip plip

"Would you get mad if I-"

"No."

Peter takes the last step between them and carefully wraps his arms around Norway's waist, pressing his face into his back and squeezing him tightly, listening in silence as the waves swallow up his sobs.

The next several days pass in a blur for Peter. Shortly after their makeshift little funeral, he falls ill with a fever. His bones ache like he has never felt before, stretching and pulling through the heat in his skin. He tries to play it off as nerves, but after less than a day, he can't even stand up without shooting pain in his feet and his knees and Sweden has to carry him between the cots and the wash bins to clear away the sweat and tears. He cries because every touch hurts, but he still grasps for Finland and Sweden, anyone close enough to hold his hands, because being alone isn't something he can handle when everything hurts like this. His heart hurts, his body hurts, his mind hurts. He doesn't know what's happening. He's exploding with heat and pain but he doesn't feel sick. It just *hurts.*

Sweden stays with him, running his fingers through his hair, and tells him that he is having a growth spurt.

"S'what happens when y'inherit a population."

When it comes time to leave, Finland wraps him in blankets that are too warm and places him in a rusty, metal wagon that he rides in a delirious haze while Sweden pulls him along. In the five days that it takes to reach the closest coast to Gothenburg, he grows three inches.

When they come to a stop, they don't need to go far to find what they are looking for. A long twist of white smoke is there to greet them from over a kilometer away and they follow it to the carved out shore where a group of people are waiting with blankets and dry clothes, all dressed in mismatched fatigues and coats with a lopsided felt star sewn into the sleeves. Peter forces himself upright, staggers to his feet on legs that tremble, and surges through the throng of humans with Sweden until he crashes headlong into the huge, imposing figure that he's been looking for.

"Good morning."

Russia looks like he's been mauled by a tiger on one side of his face, but he is smiling when he turns to face them. He's still wearing his scarf, torn up and ratty and dotted with rusty stains, and his gloves are worn down to threads when he offers an armful of heavy, winter coats to him.

"We have been expecting you."

Peter twists around him to stare blearily at the commanding figure that is the huge submarine's conning tower, dull black and bobbing a ways offshore, small rowboats going back and forth between the vessel and the camp they have made in the sand. Russia's eyes follow his and he grins as he drops a coat over Peter's shoulders.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

Peter nods and grips the corners of the collar, still looking out over the water. "It's bigger than I thought."

"It is the biggest," he sweeps a hand across the shore. "Typhoon class. We have modified it to have a seating capacity of three hundred." He turns back to face Sweden, nodding sternly. "There are specially reserved places for our kind. We have set aside six seats for your family."

Sweden grimaces and starts to say something, but he is interrupted by a loud yell and a flurry of clacking metal as a leather clad figure comes crashing into him, arms wrapping around his waist and yanking him off of his feet, wet sand sent splattering against Russia's coat.

"Sweden! Ikea guy!" America laughs, swinging him around and bouncing, much to the grunting dismay of Berwald. "You made it!"

"Good t'see ya too, 'merica…" Sweden twists himself free and coughs into his fist, glasses askew. He looks up when Finland hurries through the crowd to meet with them, Iceland and Norway trailing behind him.

Peter doesn't have time to say hello before America grabs him up as well. "And you! You made it, you made it, you made it!" He twirls him around, lighting Peter's bones on fire again as he does, oblivious to his uncomfortable spluttering until Finland steps forward and plucks him free.

"I see you're still as fresh faced as ever," Finland smiles. He places Peter back down to sit in the wagon. "He's a bit sore, so if you could please refrain from trying to swing him into space?"

America laughs loudly. "Thanks for thinking I'm so strong, but even I couldn't throw someone into space! Trust me, we tried that during the Cold War!" He starts forward to grab up Norway and Iceland into a bear hug, but they both step back much faster than he can close his arms.

"No, thank you," Iceland sticks out his hand. "A handshake will be fine."

America blinks at him. After a moment, he grins and offers a fist instead, bumping their knuckles (and Iceland's nubs) together. "You weird Viking guys. Even the world exploding won't loosen you up."

Norway rolls his eyes and makes no effort to acknowledge America beyond a nod of his head, both hands tucked securely in his pockets and feet poised to shift out of harm's way should another flying tackle come for him. America bounces between them all. He picks at their coats and lifts up their arms, inspecting them and babbling excitedly all the while.

"Wow, you guys look great! Way better than everyone we pulled out of Berlin!" He laughs again when Sweden shakes him off. He grins over in Peter's direction. "We found some friends of yours, even!"

Peter's heart clenches. "Really?"

"Really! England and France really were with Germany! We found them easy as pie!"

"Are they okay?"

He nods enthusiastically. "Yeah! Well, I mean, England's kinda beat up and his voice is even more annoying than usual and France is in pretty rough shape, but they're both still breathing!" He plants his hands on his hips. "They're already heading back in the smaller sub that they filled up in Germany with Mattie. You'll get to see them when we get home!"

" *Your* home," Norway mutters into his coat lapels.

America's grin widens. "No, it's home for everybody! The whole continent is just one, big community now. No borders or anything!"

Norway stares at him skeptically, but says nothing. During the silence, something seems to click in America's eyes and his smile falters.

"Hey…" he drops his hands. "Where's Denmark?"

Again, Peter's heart seizes. He starts to reply, but nothing comes out and Sweden lays a hand on his shoulder.

"Didn't make it," he says flatly.

"O-oh…" he glances at Peter. "Did you at least get to-"

"Yes," Finland cuts him off. "He made it back and we were able to say our goodbyes."

Peter can feel America's eyes boring into him but the energy to say anything is just too much of an effort and he keeps his gaze focused on the shifting sand below the wagon. Even when Alfred crouches down in front of him and awkwardly squeezes his hand, he doesn't look up.

"Hey, look, I'm…" America falters and sighs. "I'm really, really, really sorry. Are you okay, buddy?"

Peter bites his lip and shakes his head.

"Ah, geez, yeah, that was a dumb question. Sorry." He hesitantly releases Peter's hands and straightens up again, turning around to face Russia. "What should we do with the f-?"

"Give it to them," Russia nods. "Let them decide."

Finland exchanges a glance with Sweden. "Give us what?"

America looks sheepish and jerks his thumb in the direction of the submarine. "Whenever we find someone, we have a guy who sews together their flag. We've got a big field of poles set up at the main colony and whenever we get someone new, we pull the flag up.

Y'know, for old times sake." He licks his lips and laughs, a little, hollow sound. "I honestly thought he would make it too, so…"

"You had someone make his flag," Norway finishes for him.

"Yeah."

Norway's face doesn't change. He moves behind the wagon and places a light hand on Peter's back. "You can still fly it." He nods downward. "He left his lands to Peter. In a way, he is bringing Denmark with us."

Peter isn't sure if he is supposed to feel good about that or not.

Russia makes sure they get on the first available boat and personally shuttles them to the submarine waiting in the deep waters. When they tie to the ladder and begin the climb up, Peter expects to hear the mammoth machine creak and groan, much like his old lands, but the whole structure is eerily silent in the water, quiet to the point that it makes him uncomfortable as Sweden gathers him up and carries him to the top. He keeps his head down while they go. He listens to the waves lap against bulkheads. Unsettling, but comforting. Like home.

The inside of the submarine is unremarkable. Benches wait for them along the walls and chairs are bolted to the floors for anyone who comes in too late to find a place on the sides. Already there are people milling amongst themselves, some wrapped in blankets and speaking quietly, others winding clean bandages over infected wounds, injuries that are common enough to make the whole craft stink. Russia leads them past these people to the far end where a whole section of seats has been roped off for them, a stack of blankets and a few bottles of water placed beneath the bench beside salt-stained life vests. He waits patiently while Sweden sets Peter down and wordlessly directs everyone to take a seat.

"Make yourselves comfortable," he says once they have settled. "We will be traveling at twenty-five knots at a depth of three-hundred and fifty meters. It will be a long journey." He motions to the blankets on the floor. "Rest will be the best way to pass your time. If you need them, sleep aids are in the first aid kits on either end of the craft."

Finland smoothes the blankets out over Peter's shoulders and eases him sideways to lie down. "You sound like a flight attendant preparing for take-off," he says lightly.

Russia looks down at him and offers a crooked smile. "Perhaps I am preparing, but I am certainly not the attendant." He leans over. "I am the captain."

From somewhere above them, America yells a loud "No he isn't!"

He straightens up, adjusting his thick coat, and nods. "We will be departing soon. I will check in with you in several hours."

Watching Russia go, Finland relaxes slightly. "I don't think I'll ever get used to being friendly with him." He turns back to Peter and sweeps his fingers through his hair. "Would you like one of the sleeping pills? Maybe take a nap to give your legs a break?"

Peter only hears him from somewhere in the very back of his head. His eyes are focused elsewhere, on the bench across from them a few rows down. On a dirty, little family wrapped in blankets. On a young girl with tangled, blonde braids.

When Ida finally notices him, she waves and smiles, bright and toothy. It reminds him instantly of Denmark. He does his best to wave back, but it's more of a limp flap of his hand than anything, and her smile starts to fade into a questioning look, eyes scanning across their bench and widening when they reach the empty seat. Her attention spins back to Peter. He just shakes his head and pulls the covers up to his chin. He doesn't wait to see her reaction; he knows that he should get up and go sit with them for a while at the very

least. They are technically his people now and he *does* feel drawn to them, but still.

Still.

"Can I have one of the pills?" He asks quietly, voice muffled by the blankets and eyes hidden in Finland's lap.

Tino nods and sends Sweden to retrieve them. He breaks apart a plastic capsule, helping Peter sit up and waiting for him to chew it before he lays him back down and leans across to wiggle his boots off.

Peter is out before the laces even come undone.

He looses track of time after they set out.

His ears pop.

The metal creaks.

Someone holds his hand.

Footsteps.

Flashlights.

Peter sleeps.

Resurfacing gives him a headache, but he is more than ready to be on dry land again. They don't have to stand in line to leave, Russia makes sure of that, but still, they linger above deck and watch as the weather beaten band of people files down the ladders, into boats, and then into the back of huge delivery carts when they land.

"Transportation to the main colony," America explains. "They run on rechargeable batteries. Pretty cool, right?"

Norway turns away from the railing and blinks at him. "You have electricity?"

America shrugs. "Not throughout the whole camp, but we have a water powered generator that everyone is allowed to use. We mostly just use it for batteries and stuff, though. Y'know, like for flashlights?"

"Impressive," Finland says. "And no one tries to steal it for themselves?"

"Nope!" He smiles proudly. "Everyone is working together! The goal is to get as many people back to health as we can and then once things calm down over in your neck of the woods, we can start setting up colonies in Europe too." He points across a line of trees in front of them. "See that smoke? That's where the camp is. It's about half an hour from here."

Peter stares at it and grips at the rails. "It's not raining ash," he murmurs. He turns back. "You and Canada really did make it out okay."

America claps his shoulder and starts for the ladder. "Nobody got out okay," he says. "Things are rough all over. There are still bad patches and a lot of the east coast is under water." He looks up over the edge of the deck. "But you're safe here." He grins at every one of them. "All of you."

They watch him slide down the ladder and make for the boats, quiet as the air around them. They are the last ones left on the deck other than Russia, and there is strange cloud of apprehension that surrounds their ragged little band; a hesitance that doesn't seem to shake.

"We should go," Iceland sighs after several minutes of tense staring. "We don't want to miss our shuttle."

Peter steps back. "I kind of want to walk," he says quietly.

Finland gives him a curious look. "Don't your legs hurt?"

"Yes, but…" he absently fingers the goggles around his neck. "We walked all that way to find you and my legs hurt then too. It doesn't seem right to just ride across the finish line after all that."

Finland glances at Sweden, worry written all over his face. But Sweden just nods and crouches down, so that he is at eye-level with Peter, and draws a folded piece of cloth out from the inside of his jacket.

"We can walk," he says. He presses it into Peter's hands. "Y'can carry 'im to the end."

Peter carefully unfolds the fabric and feels his stomach tangle up. The shock of red and white that is Denmark's flag seems woefully out of place against the black metal of the submarine, and it's stranger still to see it pinned together with his own flag. "When did you get these?"

Sweden jerks his head in Russia's direction. "B'fore we landed. Y'were sleepin'." He reaches out and runs his thumb along the surface of the cloth. "S'a nice job they did. S'gonna look good'n the air." He looks at Peter. "Don't y'think?"

Peter smiles and wipes his eyes. "Uh-huh."

Sweden straightens up again and gives him a gentle push toward the ladder. Peter doesn't resist.

The walk to the camp is spent in complete silence. Each of them are lost in their own heads as they go, taking in the smell of the air and the bits of green still left in the trees and plant life that line the dirt trail. It's humid; cool and damp and Peter thinks that it must still rain here sometimes for it to taste so good with each breath he takes. It's not clean, but it's a far cry from the polluted skies he's been so used to.

Voices trickle through the trees as they get closer and after what seems like a short time, people begin to drift past them along the trail, some carrying baskets full of ashy looking cardboard and paper, others with rubber bins sloshing with water. They seem curious as they pass, smiling and greeting them with the same keen interest that Peter and his family show them. It's strange to receive such warm welcomes after so many months of running and hiding and Peter is overtaken by a sudden bought of shyness, unable to really say hello to anyone without stammering and gripping tight to Sweden's sleeve. It isn't that he doesn't trust them- it's just that he doesn't really remember how to do it.

America is waiting for them at the end of the trail with a huge grin and a yellow folder full of paper. "Welcome home!" He crows, throwing his arms to the side and whirling them into the camp. "Come on in!"

Peter stumbles forward, propelled by Alfred's enthusiasm, and comes to a stuttering stop in the middle of what is apparently town square. A huge pile of charred concrete debris lies in front of him, bigger than Sweden, and keeps a tall, metal flagpole anchored straight, flying the blue flag of United Nations. Behind it, rows of heavy, canvas tents make up common areas where throngs of people sit, preparing food or playing cards, work mingling with play and changing out in shifts that Peter can't quite figure the pattern for. It isn't much to look at, really. Collections of tents, concrete, and rubber. But the air is buzzing with the conversation of a multitude of languages, laughter, and the sounds of every day, routine life.

The air is *alive.*

"We've got a tent set up for you already." America slaps the folder into Sweden's hands. "It's a big one so you can all stay together! There's a map in there and your registration forms. Just turn 'em in whenever and we'll figure out your work schedule later." He points at Norway. "Everybody's gotta work!" His finger moves to Iceland. "It's what makes the system work!"

Norway scowls at him. "I've been getting my hands dirty for a lot longer than you have," he says flatly. "We have no problem with work."

"Great!" He plants a fist on his hip. "Any questions?"

Peter tilts his head slightly and takes a step forward, around the flag block. "What's that?" He asks and points to a dented, metal box bolted to the brick wall of a crumbling building. It's covered in stickers and paint, so many that he can't see any sign of an original color, even around the thin slot in the front. "It looks like a post box."

"Oh yeah!" He spins and trots over to it, giving it a firm, clanging pat. "This is the mailbox! The kids decided to decorate it, so that's why it looks so cool."

Iceland blinks and takes a curious step toward it as well. "You have a mail system?"

"Ah, well," America makes a face. "Not quite. We have a bulletin board for leaving messages. This," he bangs on it again. "Is for sending grief letters. Y'know, notes to people who probably'll never get 'em. You know how sometimes when you're really mad at someone, you can write them a letter complaining and venting about them and then never send it? It's kinda like that. Except the letters are nice. And you do send it. Sort of." He wiggles a finger into the slot and sighs. "Lotsa people do it. There are a lot of people missing somebody."

"That's a very creative form of therapy," Finland hums. "I like it." He looks over to Norway. "What do you think?"

Norway shoots him a pointed glance, obviously annoyed at being put on the spot. "I think I'll be needing a pen," he says simply and turns back to the box, crossing his arms. For the briefest moment, Peter thinks he might see him smile, but he can't be sure.

"Oh, one last thing," America turns and points to hill past the tents. "The flags are over there." He grins at them. "You should hang yours up. Everybody'll know you're here that way!"

"That's a good idea," Finland says, fishing the carefully folded fabric from his bag. "Afterwards, we can explore for awhile." He turns and holds a hand out for Peter to take. "You ready?"

Peter pauses, not really looking anywhere in particular. "I'll catch up with you," he says slowly. "I need to find someone first."

Finland blinks. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, that's okay," he turns and begins to jog in the direction of the tents. "I'll be up there in a few minutes, I promise!"

He doesn't wait to see if Finland approves or not and hurries to the rows that weave between the lines of canvas. Many of the people who came in with them are milling about, introducing themselves and filling out their papers while they wait for housing assignments. It's as good a place as any to start and he finds a few people with clipboards who look official enough to ask. They point him to the big tent at the end of the last row.

Much to his surprise, he finds Ida and her family almost immediately upon pulling the canvas flap back. She's waiting with her own stack of folders, trying to keep her siblings quiet as they stand in line to turn them in, her father and mother talking in low voices; trying to figure out what is going on if Peter had to wager a guess. He runs up to them, bumbling through an awkward 'excuse me' when he runs headlong into her father.

"Ida," he tries to smile. "Can you come with me for a minute?"

She looks perplexed, but nods. "Sure," she hurries after him when he turns around and falls into step with him. "What for?"

He holds out his hand. "We're gonna hang up some flags."

Again, she seems confused, but she breaks out into a mischievous grin (once more reminding him of Denmark) and laces her fingers with his, eagerly picking up the pace to run beside him to the main path up the hill. It's an odd thing, holding her hand as they run. In the bunker, she had been distrustful of them, even after talking to Denmark, but now, she laughs when he stumbles, squeezing his hand and encouraging him to hurry up like they are old friends. He still doesn't quite feel like she is one of his, but he begins to wonder if perhaps the odd gravitation to each other is mutual.

When they reach the top of the hill, they are met with a wave of color against the gray sky. Flagpoles reach for the clouds in a wide spiral over the whole clearing and there is just enough of a breeze that the cloth flaps cordially, greeting them. Finland waves to him from near the middle of the circle, a hand still on the rope from pulling his own up to the highest point, right next to Sweden's with two empty poles in the middle, Norway and Iceland on the other side. They are out of breath when they stop and Norway surprises them by being the first to speak, before introductions can even begin.

"You're Danish," he says.

"And you have a good eye."

Peter clears his throat. "This is Ida. We met her and her family when we were coming to find you." He motions to them. "Ida, this is my family."

She smiles. "I figured." She points to Sweden. "You're Berwald, right?"

Sweden blinks.

"You have the scariest face," she laughs. "Mathias was talking about you and he said that he had a brother with a face like Frankenstein's monster." She turns to face Norway, her face softening. "And you're Niels, huh?"

Norway nods. "I am." He sighs lightly. "I suppose that oaf told you something equally obnoxious about me as well?"

"No, not at all," she shifts slightly and, for a moment, looks very awkward. "He talked about you the most, but it was never anything bad. He went on a lot about how completely in love you were."

"How does that make you recognize me?"

She shrugs. "You look the saddest."

Norway's frown deepens. "Ah."

"Here," Peter tugs on her sleeve before the situation can get anymore depressing and pulls her to the empty flag poles. "I wanted you to put this one up." He hands her the bright red flag. Her face lights up and Peter grins. "Since he can't do it, I think you should."

She gently unfolds the thick cloth and runs her fingers over the tightly woven fibers. "I haven't seen one of these in years," she says quietly. She looks up, beaming. "He was your uncle, right?" She grabs his hand and stuffs one corner of the flag into his palm. "We can do it together." She cranes her head around to look at the others. "You too. Everyone can help."

There is a brief, completive pause before Norway and Iceland both step forward at the same time, each of them crossing to take a bit of the rope between their fingers while Sweden and Finland both thread the line through their own respective corners, bringing Peter's flag to the pole directly next to it. Ida, Peter, and Norway line their hands up, one on top of the other, on the rope beneath Denmark's flag. Sweden, Iceland, and Finland take the other.

A moment of silence and up they go.

Denmark,

It's been a month since we got here and I think it's starting to finally feel like home. It's nothing like Sweden's old house, since we live in a tent and stuff, but everyone is really nice and does a good job with helping each other. We all were assigned jobs and I guess mine is pretty good. I get to go out with a bunch of other people and dig for cans, kind of like how we used to go scavenging. It's really messy and dirty but it's also a little bit fun because sometimes it feels like I'm digging a hole to China or something. I don't have to do it forever though, since America is teaching me how to filter water. England is learning too, but he spends most of the time with Germany trying to work on a cure for Canada and everybody else who is sick. I think they're getting close to figuring it out. Canada was able to wiggle his toe yesterday!

I've been making a lot of new friends too. I know I'm a lot older than they are, but it's still fun to go and play with them sometimes. We have a real basketball hoop, even. A ball too, but I still throw that stupid dog toy through it sometimes. All the other kids think I'm weird for doing it. So thanks a lot for that, jerk.

Everybody is doing okay, but we all really miss you. Especially Norway, but I guess you probably already know that since he writes you a letter every single day. Iceland too, but he doesn't know that I know that he does. What does he talk to you about in his notes? Sometimes he goes outside of the tent at night and he talks to his hairpin like you used to do, but it's always in Norwegian so I dunno what he's saying. (I'm not trying to spy on you guys, I promise.) Mama says Norway is just telling you that you're a big fathead, but I don't think that's true. He also told me what 'perkele' really means. Just so you know, I said it when he and Papa were saying goodnight and I thought they were going to explode. Mama turned really red and I had to wash dishes for a week as punishment. It was kind of worth it though because the face Sweden made was really, really funny.

Anyway, don't be surprised if they scold you in their next letters. You deserve it.

I think you would really like it here. It feels a lot like how Copenhagen used to be when we would come visit you in the summers and you had all of those festivals going on. People are just really happy and it's easy to tell since they're always smiling. There's a whole area just for playing board games and there's a big field where a lot of the kids like to go play tag in. (They always take a grown up with them, though. Just in case, you know?) There's also a big brick oven that we are allowed to use if we bring wood to fuel it, so I'm trying to learn how to bake so that I can make sweet bread or something. I go out and look for wood every Sunday so that I can use it for a few hours. We don't really have the ingredients to make anything except bread right now, but we have fruit preserves so it's a little like pastry. Mine are okay but I think yours would be better. Norway says you always burned yours, but I don't believe him. I bet they are awesome.

Russia and America are still going out to find people with their submarines. They say that the air is starting to clear so it might be possible to fly safely in a few years, so Alfred is really excited for that.

It's kind of hard when they bring new people back though. Some of them are really suspicious and don't trust us, so helping them is really tough. Most of them start warming up after a few days, but it's kind of hard to ignore the ones who don't. There are some people who have taken their families and refuse to come into the camp and they just camp out in front of the church down the road. I asked them why one time and a lady started screaming at me that there had been a mistake and they were waiting for the real rapture to save them. I tried to tell her that they would be safer if they waited with the rest of us but that didn't go so well. There are some other people who do stay in the tents, but I don't think they're happy. They stay up all night because they don't trust us. They'll only take food if it's from a can and they're just really weird.

I think all of them think that there's no hope left. They're just waiting around to die because they don't think things will ever get better. But that's can't be right, can it? If someone has a goal, especially now,

they should hold onto it. It will make them stronger. That's how it was for us, right? For you? Before you found me, I used to think like the people who want to give up, but after everything we went through together?

I just think they're insane.

Yours truly,

Peter Kirkland

Sovereign State of Sjælland

-The End-

Final word count: 98,120

And so it has come to an end. I always feel so weird when I finish a long story like this. I get so attached to what I'm working on… I feel like I'm sending my kid off to college or something. ;_;

A few notes:

"Enjoy the great hall" – Norway is referring to Valhalla. Though Denmark technically did not die during combat, per say, I think Odin will still let him in. And Fólkvangr doesn't quite seem like his style.

"Sovereign State of Sjælland" – The largest island in the collection that makes up Denmark is called "Zealand" in English and "Sjælland" in Danish. It all amounts to meaning "Sealand." Get it? Get it? SHUT UP, MY MOM SAYS I'M CLEVER OKAY

"I think they're insane" – Remember chapter one? He thought they were crazy then and he thinks they're crazy now. I have a bad habit of ending my stuff the way they began. Oops.

I think that's all for now. OP, I think I lost you somewhere along the way, but if you are still around, I hope you enjoyed it. This prompt

kind of ran away with me after you said you liked the idea of a post-apocalyptic setting, so if it was not what you were wanting or hoping for, I sincerely apologize and will do my best to make it up to you in the future.

For everyone else who stuck along for the ride, thank you so, so, so much. You guys are what make this so much fun and I still can't believe how many awesome people I've met throughout writing this thing. Your comments were incredibly motivating (Jii, I'm looking at you, girlfriend) and the PMs with crit were very, very helpful and I am extremely grateful for all of the feedback I've received. Comparing this to my first huge fic, I think I've made a noticeable improvement, and I owe it all to those friendly anons and not-so-anons who were there to give me a kind kick in the pants whenever I'd start flubbing into bad habits.

And to everyone who drew fanart, you guys are my heroes. Seriously. I have a wall above my work desk and I've printed out every piece of art anyone has ever made for me and pinned it there. You are all amazingly talented and it just makes me all fuzzy when I see the pictures. Thank you so much!

It's been fun, but I'm relieved to be done with it. It's time for brighter fields! I'm going to try and get caught up on some requests in the next week or so, and in a few weeks, I'm going to start work on that Netherlands/Denmark romance that I've not-so-secretly been gargling on about. (If anyone has some recommended reading for Dutch history, I would be forever grateful. I've got a few books on hold at the library, but since school is in session, there's a pretty long wait on them. And I'd feel like a dick for hoarding a book that a sad high school student needs to finish their history report.)

See you all again soon! I love you all!

PS. It's not 100% over. I have one little surprise left for everyone who has been reading at my journal.